

Person First Language: Guidelines for discussing people with disabilities

It's the "Person First" - THEN the Disability

If you saw a person in a wheelchair unable to get up the stairs into a building, would you say "there is a handicapped person unable to find a ramp?" Or would you say "there is a person with a disability who is handicapped by an inaccessible building?" What is the proper way to speak to or about someone who has a disability?

Consider how you would introduce someone - Jane Doe - who doesn't have a disability. You would give her name, where she lives, what she does or what she is interested in - she likes swimming, or eating Mexican food, or watching Robert Redford movies.

Why say it differently for a person with disabilities? Every person is made up of many characteristics - mental as well as physical - few want to be identified only by their ability to play tennis or by their love for fried onions or by the mole that's on their face. Those are just parts of us.

Person first language.

In speaking or writing, remember that children or adults with disabilities are like everyone else - except they happen to have a disability. Therefore, here are a few tips for improving your language related to disabilities and handicaps.

1. Speak of the person first, then the disability.
2. Emphasize abilities, not limitations.
3. Do not label people as part of a disability group - don't say "disabled", say "people with disabilities."
4. Don't give excessive praise or attention to a person with a disability; don't patronize them.
5. Choice and independence are important; let the person do or speak for him or herself as much as possible; if addressing an adult, say "Bill" instead of "Billy."
6. A disability is a functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability to walk, hear, talk, learn, etc. use handicap to describe a situation or barrier imposed by society, the environment, or oneself.

SAY

child with a disability
person with cerebral palsy
person who has . . .
without speech, nonverbal
developmental delay
emotional disorder or mental illness
deaf or hearing impaired
uses a wheelchair
person with mental retardation
has a learning disability
nondisabled
has a physical disability
congenital disability

INSTEAD OF

disabled or handicapped child
palsied, or C.P., or spastic
afflicted, suffers from, victim
mute, or dumb
slow
crazy or insane
deaf and dumb
confined to a wheelchair
retarded
is learning disabled
normal, healthy
crippled
birth defect

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