

# Watch Your Words

They Affect Others

## People-First Language Guide

### Words are the only things that last forever.

People with disabilities know all too well that words can create opportunities or build barriers. Man or woman, adult or child, individuals with disabilities deal with disrespectful language on a daily basis.

Imagine the frustration of constantly having to explain to those around you why the words that people

often use are hurtful and offensive. For too long, words have been used to separate and isolate the disability community.

### Watch your thoughts, for they become words. Choose your words, for they become actions.

We all want the respect and acceptance of our peers. The language used by our teachers, co-workers, friends and families has an impact. Time after time,

people with disabilities have been identified not by who they are as a person but by their disability. The language a society uses to refer to people with disabilities shapes its beliefs and ideas about them. Words are powerful. If you acquire a disability in your lifetime, how do you want others to describe you? Disability affects all people. Let your words speak volumes. Learn respectful language, use it and teach it to others.

To paraphrase writer George Orwell: if thought corrupts language, then language can corrupt thought. Put another way: the words we choose reflect our attitudes.

That's why there has been a movement within the disability community to promote the use of **people-first language**. What, exactly, is "people-first language"? People-first language is respectful.

The formula is simple: when writing or speaking, put the person before the disability. Now you are using respectful, people-first language.

For people with disabilities, the use of people-first language is a major step toward full acceptance as contributing members of society. Individuals with disabilities are not broken; having a disability is, for them, a natural way of life. It gives those individuals a unique and valuable perspective.

People-first language also prevents the tendency to reduce the person to the disability. When words alone define a person,

the result is a label – a label that almost always reinforces the barriers created by negative and stereotypical attitudes.

## **We cannot always control our thoughts, but we can control our words.**

As the nation's largest minority, people with disabilities are also the most inclusive and most diverse population. There is power in numbers and value in diversity. People with disabilities and other disability advocates are working hard to eliminate the prejudicial language that creates attitudinal barriers and perpetuates negative stereotypes.

Like paint on a canvas, words create a powerful image. The question is whether we want that image to be a straightforward, positive reflection of people

with disabilities, or an insensitive portrayal that reinforces common myths and is, in that context, a form of discrimination.

And one more thing – let's not talk about "special needs" anymore. People with disabilities see, hear, speak, think, learn, process, read, write, move and/or feel in ways that are less common than most. Their needs are not "special," so please use the word "disability" instead. People with disabilities do not want "special" treatment; they want a level playing field.



# A Final Word

## The do's and don'ts in the use of people-first language.

Put the person first when writing or speaking about people with disabilities. Stay away from labels like “the blind,” “the deaf” or “the disabled.” They do not reflect the individuality, equality or dignity of people with disabilities. With this in mind, when referring to a person with a disability...

Say or write this...	Instead of this...
She is a person with a disability.	She is handicapped or disabled.
He is an individual without a disability.	He is able-bodied.
They are children (kids) without disabilities.	They are normal or healthy children (kids).
He is a person with a cognitive disability.	He's retarded.
She is an individual with autism.	She's autistic.
He needs behavior supports.	He has behavior problems.
She is a person with a learning disability.	She's learning-disabled.
He uses a wheelchair.	He's confined to a wheelchair.
She has a physical disability.	She's a quadriplegic or a cripple.
He has a brain injury.	He's brain-damaged.
She has a congenital disability.	She suffers from a birth defect.
He is a person with an intellectual disability.	He's a retard or mentally defective.
She is a person who is blind or visually impaired.	She is blind.
He is a person who is deaf or hard of hearing.	He suffers from a hearing loss or from being deaf.
She is an individual with (or who has) multiple sclerosis or muscular dystrophy.	She is afflicted by MS or MD.
He is a person with cerebral palsy.	He is victim of CP.
She is an individual with epilepsy.	She is an epileptic.
He is a person with a psychiatric disability.	He is crazy, nuts, etc.
She is a person who no longer lives in an institution.	She is deinstitutionalized.
He is a person who uses an assistive speech device or is unable to speak.	He is dumb or a mute.



1515 West 7th Street, Suites 320-330  
Little Rock, Arkansas 72201  
(501) 682-2897  
[GCDD.ark.org](http://GCDD.ark.org)