

People First Language

A Few Words About People First Language by Kathie Snow

[Adapted by Ability360 with Ms. Snow's permission. Visit www.disabilityisnatural.com to see the original, full-length article.]

People with disabilities constitute our nation's largest minority group. It's also the most inclusive and most diverse: both genders, any sexual orientations, and all ages, religions, socioeconomic levels, and ethnicities are represented. Yet the only thing people with disabilities have in common is being on the receiving end of societal misunderstanding, prejudice, and discrimination. And this largest minority group is the only one which anyone can join at any time: at birth, in the split second of an accident, through illness, or during the aging process. If and when it happens to you, how will you want to be described?

Words Matter!

Old and inaccurate descriptors perpetuate negative stereotypes and reinforce an incredibly powerful attitudinal barrier, which are the greatest obstacle facing individuals with disabilities. A disability is, first and foremost, a medical diagnosis, and when we define people by their diagnoses, we devalue and disrespect them as individuals. Do you want to be known primarily by your physical, sensory or mental condition? Using medical diagnoses incorrectly – as a measure of a person's abilities or potential --- can ruin people's lives.

“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.” Mark Twain

Embrace a New Paradigm

“Disability is a natural part of the human experience...” (*U.S. Developmental Disabilities/ Bill of Rights Act*). Yes, disability is natural, and it can be *redefined* as a “body part that works differently.” A person with spina bifida has legs that work differently, a person with Down syndrome learns differently, and so forth. People can no more be defined by their medical diagnoses than others can be defined by gender, ethnicity, religion, or other traits!

A diagnosis may also become a sociopolitical passport for services, entitlements, or legal protections. Thus, medical, educational, legal, or similar settings are the only places where the use of a diagnosis is relevant.

People First Language

Puts the person before the disability, and describes what a person *has*, not who a person *is*. Are you “cancerous” or do you have cancer? Is a person “handicapped/disabled” or does she “have a disability”? Using a diagnosis as a defining characteristic reflects prejudice, and also robs the person of the opportunity to define himself.

Let's reframe “problems” and into “needs.” Instead of, “He has behavior problems,” we can say, “He needs behavior supports.” Instead of, “She has reading problems,”

we can say, "She needs large print." And let's eliminate the "special needs" descriptor---it generates pity and low expectations!

A person's self image is tied to the words used about him. People First Language reflects good manners, not "political correctness," and it was started by individuals who said, "We are not our disabilities!" We can create a new paradigm of disability and change the world in the process. Using People First Language is right---just do it, now!

- Speak of the person first, then the disability.
- Don't label a group of people by their disability – for instance say "people with disabilities" rather than "the disabled",
- Emphasize abilities, not limitations.
- Most people with disabilities want to be viewed like other non-disabled people, rather than viewed as "special" or "courageous."
- Let the person do or speak for him/herself as much as possible.

A Few Examples of People First Language:

Say:

People with disabilities

Bus rider with a disability

Children/adults with disabilities

He has a cognitive/intellectual disability

She has autism

He has Down Syndrome

She has a learning disability

He has a physical disability

She uses a wheelchair

He receives special ed services

People without disabilities

Communicates with her eyes/device/etc.

Congenital disability

Brain injury

Accessible parking, hotel room, etc.

Instead of:

The disabled, handicapped, invalid

Disabled bus rider

Crippled, has special needs

He's mentally retarded, retard

She's autistic

He's Down's/mongoloid

She's learning disabled

He's a quadriplegic/crippled

She's confined to/wheelchair bound

He's in special ed; a special ed kid

Normal or healthy people

Is non-verbal.

Birth defect

Brain damaged

Handicapped parking, hotel room, etc.