



Disability Awareness: People-First Language

Est. Time: 20-30 Minutes

Objective

1) To learn the proper use of people-first language when referring to individuals with disabilities, and 2) to identify instances when improper terminology is used to refer to individuals with disabilities.

Overview

It's important to keep in mind that the language and terminology we use often reflect our beliefs, perceptions, and misconceptions in ways we may not always be consciously aware of. Many times, the use of a phrase or term can be demeaning, even if that was not the speaker's intent. As terminology evolves, a word or phrase that was acceptable at one point takes on a different connotation at another. For example, one recent change is the use of *intellectual and developmental disability*, *cognitive disability*, or simply *intellectual disability* to replace the now-outdated *mental retardation*. The move to a more positive terminology is something that the disability community has confronted.

Advocacy from the disability community has also resulted in the current use of people-first terminology in which the person comes *first*, his or her disability *second*:

- An individual with a disability
- A person who has autism
- A student with a learning disability
- A child who has Down syndrome

Similarly, speakers must avoid terms and phrases that equate the person with the disability (e.g., *disabled* is not a noun—see the first item in the table below) or that carry negative connotations.

Don't Say	Say Instead
The disabled	A child who has a disability
A person who <i>suffers from</i> cerebral palsy	A person who has cerebral palsy
A man who is <i>confined to</i> a wheelchair	A man who uses a wheelchair



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Overview [Cont.]

As with any guidelines, there are exceptions. The two most common refer to people with vision or hearing loss. In these cases, it is also acceptable to refer to a *deaf student* (particularly those who use American Sign Language—ASL—and consider themselves members of the Deaf community) or a *blind person*.

A final two caveats: 1) Not every member of every group agrees with these terminology choices, and 2) terminology will continue to change. But school personnel who are aware of these issues and who exhibit thoughtfulness and sensitivity when referring to individuals with disabilities can avoid offending students and their families.

Activity

1. Determine which of the terms below are acceptable and which are not. Suggest appropriate replacements for those that are unacceptable.

- Students with disabilities
- The disabled
- Individuals with autism
- Crippled students
- An epileptic
- A child with a visual impairment
- A hearing impaired infant
- Wheelchair users
- A mentally retarded child
- The deaf person
- An adult who suffers from cerebral palsy
- A student with a speech impairment
- A developmentally delayed toddler
- A student with ADHD

2. Conduct a search of news stories about individuals with disabilities in a variety of media formats (newspaper, magazine, Web stories). Note the use of appropriate and inappropriate terminology.

Questions/Discussion Topics

1. What other terms have you heard that refer to individuals with disabilities? Are these terms appropriate or inappropriate? Explain.
2. In your search of news stories, what did you discover? Were you surprised by any of your findings? Explain.
3. How important do you think it is that reporters use appropriate terminology? Explain your answer.
4. Imagine that, as a teacher, you overhear one of your students using an inappropriate term to refer to another student who has a disability. What would you do, and why would you do it?