

Using Appropriate Words

Language is a powerful tool that can shape society's attitudes, ideas and perceptions. Attitudes can be the most difficult barrier that persons with disabilities must face in gaining full integration, acceptance and participation in society. Demeaning, belittling or negative words are a barrier to greater understanding and can trivialize genuine support given by a community to persons with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities are working to achieve equality, independence and full participation in our society. The ways in which issues are reported and the use of proper terminology can help persons with disabilities reach these goals.

It is important to remember that each word in today's terminology has a precise meaning and that the words are not interchangeable. Disabled and handicapped is not the same thing. A disability is a functional limitation or restriction of an individual's ability to perform an activity. A handicap is an environmental or attitudinal barrier that limits the opportunity for a person to participate fully. Negative attitudes or inaccessible entrances to buildings are examples of handicaps.

The word "disabled" is an adjective, not a noun. People are not conditions. It is correct to use "persons with disabilities", not "the disabled".

Persons with disabilities are comfortable with the terminology used to describe daily living activities. Persons who use wheelchairs go for "walks", people with visual impairments "see" what you mean. A disability may just mean that some things are done in a different manner' however, that does not mean the words used to describe the activity must be different.

Remember that although some disabilities are not visible, they are just as real. Individuals with invisible disabilities such as epilepsy, hemophilia, mental health, learning, or developmental disabilities also encounter negative attitudes and barriers.

Avoid using words that label a person. Labels set people apart as different and somehow not "normal". Here are some ideas that help us to remember that we are describing people, rather than a disability, a mode of transportation or a "victim".

- Put the person first: remember the whole person, and avoid emphasizing the disability to the exclusion of individual qualities and achievements.
- Focus on the individual worth: emphasize the worth and unique qualities of all individuals rather than focusing on differences between persons.
- Show the strength: attempt to portray the persons with a disability doing something for someone else, or acting independently, for example as a parent, community leader, participant or decision maker.

Words to avoid that carry negative connotation and do not recognize the individual as a whole person include the following:

- afflicted with – use simply the person has...
- cripple – avoid this term all together
- disabled – emphasize the person first by saying a person with a disability
- disease – although this term can be used when referring to some causes of disability such as polio and Parkinson's disease, which are diseases, many causes of disability are not diseases, such as cerebral palsy and stroke
- inflicted – use instead caused by
- invalid – use the person who a disability resulting from or caused by...
- restricted to/confined to – say uses a wheelchair or walks with crutches
- the retarded/the visually impaired/the aged – say instead person with visual impairment, seniors, person with an intellectual disability
- victim of – use instead person who has... person with... person who experienced...

These suggestions are guidelines only. It is important to be aware of the impact that our words can have on the formation of attitudes.

Attitudes toward words change over time. What was considered acceptable a few years ago may be frowned upon now and what is considered acceptable now will likely be unacceptable at some time in the future. Words are a mirror of society's attitudes.

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