

People First Language



Language is power. Our words have the power to inspire, motivate, and uplift people. They also have the power to hurt, isolate and oppress individuals or entire segments of society. Often times, throughout our history, it has become necessary to change our language and the way in which we refer to individuals and groups to avoid further oppressing those members of society. The time has come to reshape our language once again so that we may refer to people with disabilities and the disability community in a respectful and inclusive manner.

People First Language is a way of addressing and talking about people with disabilities emphasizing the person rather than the disability. Rather than calling a person disabled, retarded, challenged, or saying that he/she suffers from a disability, say that he/she has a disability, or is a person with a disability, or omit the qualifier all together. The key with people first language is ordering what we say so that the person and not the person's diagnosis or disability comes first. When describing people, we want to emphasize the person, not the qualities that make him or her different.

Why Bother Anyways? It is important, because we generally view the first item in a phrase as the most important. When describing people with disabilities, we won't focus on the person, not the person's impairments. Just as it can be offensive to describe a person based on their race or religion we also should not address a person based on his/her disability. Focusing on a person rather than the person's disability also improves the person's self-esteem helping him/her to define him/herself as a person with unique attributes rather than defining him/her by a diagnosis or impairments.

How to Use People First language:

Say...

Child with special needs
Child with autism
Person who uses a wheelchair
Child with Downs Syndrome
Person who has HIV
Child with CP
Child with cognitive delays

Rather Than...

Handicapped child
Autistic
Wheelchair bound
Down's or Mongoloid
HIV Victim
Child who suffers from
CP Mentally Retarded

