

It's the 'Person First' Then the Disability

What do you see first?

- The wheelchair?
- The physical problem?
- The person?



If you saw a person in a wheelchair unable to get up the stairs into a building, would you say “There is a handicapped person unable to find a ramp?” Or would you say “There is a person with a disability who is handicapped by an inaccessible building?”

What is the proper way to speak to or about someone who has a disability?

Consider how you would introduce someone—Jane Doe—who doesn't have a disability. You would give her name, where she lives, what she does or what she is interested in: she likes swimming, or eating Mexican food, or watching movies.

Why say it differently for a person with a disability? Every person is made up of many characteristics — mental as well as physical. Few people want to be identified only by their ability to play tennis or by their love for fried onions.

In speaking or writing, remember that children or adults with disabilities are like everyone else — except they happen to have a disability. Therefore, here are a few tips for improving your language related to people with disabilities.

- 1 Speak of the person first, then the disability.
- 2 Emphasize abilities, not limitations.
- 3 Do not label people as part of a disability group. Don't say “the disabled;” say “people with disabilities.”
- 4 Don't give excessive praise or attention to a person with a disability; don't patronize them.
- 5 Choice and independence are important. Let the person do or speak for him or herself as much as possible.
- 6 A disability is a functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability to walk, hear, talk, learn, etc. Use handicap to describe a situation or barrier imposed by society, the environment, or oneself.

Say . . .

Instead of . . .

child with a disability	disabled or handicapped child
person with cerebral palsy	C.P., or spastic
person who is deaf or hard of hearing	deaf and dumb
person with a cognitive or intellectual disability	mentally retarded; retard
person with epilepsy or person with seizure disorder	epileptic
person who has...	afflicted, suffers from, victim
without speech, nonverbal	mute, or dumb
developmental delay	slow
emotional disorder, or mental illness	crazy, insane, or mentally ill
uses a wheelchair	confined to a wheelchair
with Down syndrome	mongoloid; retard
has a learning disability	is learning disabled
nondisabled ✕	normal, healthy
has a physical disability	crippled
congenital disability	birth defect
condition	disease (unless it's a disease)
seizures	fits or spells
cleft lip	hare lip
mobility impaired	lame
medically involved, or has chronic illness	sickly
paralyzed	invalid or paralytic
has hemiplegia (paralysis of one side of the body)	hemiplegic
has quadriplegia (paralysis of both arms and legs)	quadriplegic
has paraplegia (loss of function in lower body only)	paraplegic
of short stature ✕	dwarf or midget
accessible parking ✕	handicapped parking