

## People First Language

### Who are People with Disabilities?

People with disabilities are — first and foremost — people. People with disabilities are people who have individual abilities, interests and needs. For the most part, they are ordinary individuals seeking to live ordinary lives. People with disabilities are moms, dads, sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, friends, neighbors, coworkers, students and teachers. About 54 million Americans — one out of every five individuals — have a disability. Their contributions enrich our communities and society as they live, work and share their lives.

### Changing Images Presented

Historically, people with disabilities have been regarded as individuals to be pitied, feared or ignored, and have been disrespected and devalued members of society. They have been portrayed as helpless victims, heroic individuals overcoming tragedy and “charity cases” who must depend on others for their well being and care — and at times, “repulsive” persons. Media coverage has frequently focused on heartwarming features and inspirational stories that reinforced stereotypes and patronized and underestimated individuals’ capabilities.

Much has changed lately. New laws, disability activism and expanded coverage of disability issues have altered public awareness and knowledge, eliminating the worst stereotypes and misrepresentations. Still, old attitudes, experiences and stereotypes die hard.

People with disabilities continue to seek accurate portrayals that present a respectful, positive view of individuals as active participants of society, in regular social, work and home environments. Additionally, people with disabilities are focusing attention on tough issues that affect quality of life, such as accessible transportation, housing, affordable health care, employment opportunities and discrimination.

### Eliminating Stereotypes — Words Matter!

Every individual regardless of sex, age, race or ability deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. As part of the effort to end discrimination and segregation — in employment, education and our communities at large — it’s important to eliminate prejudicial language.



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Like other minorities, the disability community has developed preferred terminology — People First Language. More than a fad or political correctness, People First Language is an objective way of acknowledging, communicating and reporting on disabilities. It eliminates generalizations, assumptions and stereotypes by focusing on the person rather than the disability.

As the term implies, People First Language refers to the individual first and the disability second. It’s saying “a child with autism” instead of “the autistic” (see Examples of People First Language.) While some people may not use preferred terminology, it’s important you don’t repeat negative terms that stereotype, devalue or discriminate — just as you’d avoid racial slurs or saying “gals” instead of “women.”

Equally important, ask yourself if the disability is even relevant and needs to be mentioned when referring to individuals, in the same way racial identification is being eliminated from news stories when it is not significant.

## What Should You Say?

Be sensitive when choosing the words you use. Here are a few guidelines on appropriate language.

- Recognize that people with disabilities are ordinary people with common goals for a home, a job and a family. Talk about people in ordinary terms.
- Never equate a person with a disability — such as referring to someone as retarded, an epileptic or quadriplegic. These labels are simply medical diagnosis. Use People First Language to tell what a person HAS, not what a person IS.
- Emphasize abilities not limitations. For example, say “a man walks with crutches,” not “he is crippled.”
- Avoid negative words that imply tragedy, such as afflicted with, suffers, victim, prisoner and unfortunate.
- Recognize that a disability is not a challenge to be overcome, and don’t say people succeed in spite of a disability. Ordinary things and accomplishments do not become extraordinary just because they are done by a person with a disability. What is extraordinary are the lengths people with disabilities have to go through and the barriers they have to overcome to do the most ordinary things.
- Use handicap to refer to a barrier created by people or the environment. Use disability to indicate a functional limitation that interferes with a person’s mental, physical or sensory abilities, such as walking, talking, hearing and learning. For example, people with disabilities who use wheelchairs are handicapped by stairs.
- Do not refer to a person as bound to or confined to a wheelchair. Wheelchairs are liberating to people with disabilities because they provide mobility.
- Do not use special to mean segregated, such as separate schools or buses for people with disabilities, or to suggest a disability itself makes someone special.
- Avoid cute euphemisms such as physically challenged, inconvenienced and differently abled.
- Promote understanding, respect, dignity and positive outlooks.

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

## What Do You Call People with Disabilities?

Friends, neighbors, coworkers, dad, grandma, Joe’s sister, my big brother, our cousin, Mrs. Schneider, George, husband, wife, colleague, employee, boss, reporter, driver, dancer, mechanic, lawyer, judge, student, educator, home owner, renter, man, woman, adult, child, partner, participant, member, voter, citizen, amigo or any other word you would use for a person.

### Examples of what you should say.

Say This

people with disabilities

people without disabilities

person who has a congenital disability

person who has (or has been diagnosed with)...

person who has Down syndrome

person who has (or has been diagnosed with) autism

person with quadriplegia, person with paraplegia, person diagnosed with a physical disability

### Examples of what you should not say.

Not This

the handicapped, the disabled

normal, healthy, whole or typical people

person with a birth defect

person afflicted with, suffers from, a victim of...

Downs person, mongoloid, mongol

the autistic

a quadriplegic, a paraplegic

**Examples of what you should say.****Examples of what you should not say.**

person with a physical disability

a cripple

person of short stature, little person

a dwarf, a midget

person who is unable to speak, person who uses a communication device

dumb, mute

people who are blind, person who is visually impaired

the blind

person with a learning disability

learning disabled

person diagnosed with a mental health condition

crazy, insane, psycho, mentally ill, emotionally disturbed, demented

person diagnosed with a cognitive disability or with an intellectual and developmental disability

mentally retarded, retarded, slow, idiot, moron

student who receives special education services

special ed student, special education student

person who uses a wheelchair or a mobility chair

confined to a wheelchair; wheelchair bound

accessible parking, bathrooms, etc.

handicapped parking, bathrooms, etc.

*Examples of People First Language*

Resource: <http://www.tcdd.texas.gov/resources/people-first-language/>

## **End the R Word Campaign**

### **Advocates explain why the R-word is so hurtful when used in jokes or as part of everyday speech.**

#### **The R-word is EXCLUSIVE**

"What's wrong with "retard"? I can only tell you what it means to me and people like me when we hear it. It means that the rest of you are excluding us from your group. We are something that is not like you and something that none of you would ever want to be. We are something outside the "in" group. We are someone that is not your kind. I want you to know that it hurts to be left out here, alone." – *Joseph Franklin Stephens, Special Olympics Virginia athlete and Global Messenger*

#### **The R-word IGNORES INDIVIDUALITY**

"Words matter. People don't need to scoff at others to make a point. Everyone has a gift and the world would be better off if we recognized it." – *Tim Shriver, CEO of Special Olympics*

The R-word equates intellectual disability with being DUMB OR STUPID

When saying the R-word, "What we mean is that he is as stupid as someone who is mentally handicapped, and we mean that in the most derogatory sense. The implication is that the only characteristic of mentally handicapped individuals is their stupidity." – *Crystal, Stanford, CA*

#### **The R-word spreads HURT**

"It is wrong to pain people with your language. Especially, when you have already been made aware of your oral transgression's impact. Make no mistake about it: WORDS DO HURT! And when you pepper your speak with "retard" and "retarded," you are spreading hurt." – *John C. McGinley, actor and star of the hit TV show "Scrubs"*

#### **The R-word is OFFENSIVE**

"The word retard is considered hate speech because it offends people with intellectual and developmental disabilities as well as the people that care for and support them. It alienates and excludes them. It also emphasizes the negative stereotypes surrounding people with intellectual and developmental disabilities; the common belief that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities should be segregated, hidden away from society, which, in my opinion, is really old fashioned." – *Karleigh Jones, Special Olympics New Zealand athlete*

#### **The R-word is INCORRECT**

"When you say the "R" word it makes people feel bad and it hurts my feelings and I don't want to hear you guys say it. Instead, you can call me a leader, a hero, or a human being, but please don't call me the "R" word." – *Dony Knight, Special Olympics Oregon athlete*

#### **The R-word is DEROGATORY**

"Because the word has become a casual description of anything negative or flawed, 'retarded' is no longer considered an appropriate way to describe people with intellectual disabilities. And any use of the word, even when used as slang and not intended to be offensive, is hurtful - because it will always be associated with people who have disabilities." – *Sara Mitton, Board Member, Treasure Valley Down Syndrome Association*

### **The R-word fosters LONELINESS**

"It hurts and scares me when I am the only person with intellectual disabilities on the bus and young people start making "retard" jokes or references. Please put yourself on that bus and fill the bus with people who are different from you. Imagine that they start making jokes using a term that describes you. It hurts and it is scary." – *Joseph Franklin Stephens, Special Olympics Virginia athlete and Global Messenger*

### **The R-word is HATE SPEECH**

"I don't think you understand how much you hurt others when you hate. And maybe you don't realize that you hate. But that's what it is; your pre-emptive dismissal of them [people with intellectual disabilities], your dehumanization of them, your mockery of them, it's nothing but another form of hate. It's more hateful than racism, more hateful than sexism, more hateful than anything." – *Soeren Palumbo, student, advocate, brother to a sister with an intellectual disability.*