

Language Guide on Disability

A PRIMER ON HOW TO SAY WHAT YOU MEAN TO SAY

INTRODUCTION

Language is powerful! It reflects, reinforces, and shapes our perceptions of people. Words that reflect positive attitudes and awareness help develop positive communication.

Words about disability have been strongly affected by legal, medical, and political terms. Consequently, our daily language is filled with technical terms that often do not convey our intended social message and are further complicated by personal styles and preference.

The following suggestions are provided as a guide to improve language usage about disability. Most suggestions are just common sense; but others are a matter of becoming aware of appropriate, **current** terminology. Using the right words can make a dramatic difference in both our private and public communications!

OUTDATED/INACCURATE TERMS AND EXPRESSIONS

We are often not aware of the biases or negative attitudes expressed in our language. Eliminating the bad words is as important as using the good words.

These words and expressions have strong negative, derogatory connotations. They can set a tone or establish barriers from the start. Avoid using them and discourage their use by others:

- afflicted
- cerebral palsied
- confined to a wheelchair
- defective
- deformed
- gimp
- invalid
- lame
- maimed
- paralytic, arthritic, epileptic
- unfortunate
- retard
- spastic, spaz
- stricken
- suffers from
- victim
- wheelchair-bound
- withered
- crazy, insane, psycho, schizo
- cripple, cripp
- deaf and dumb
- poor

PREFERRED TERMS AND EXPRESSIONS

These words and expressions are currently preferred and reflect a positive attitude. Some language is “trendy” and meanings may vary depending on context and locale. Use the words below after “Person who is/has _____”.

- blind
- deaf/hard of hearing
- mental retardation
- a psychiatric disability
- a wheelchair-user
- a paraplegic
- cerebral palsy
- visually impaired
- seizures
- a developmental disability

EXAMPLE OF GOOD AND BAD USAGE

Language should accurately describe an individual situation. It should emphasize the person first, rather than the disability.

DON'T SAY

“Mr. Lee is a crippled teacher and confined to a wheelchair.”

DO SAY

“Mr. Lee is a teacher with a disability. He is a wheelchair-user.”

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT LANGUAGE?

We can educate.

We can inform.

We can politely correct inaccurate use of language.

We can ask the person with a disability for clarification.

We can seek positive use of communication media.

We can encourage a societal attitude where only positive, accurate

words are acceptable in the context of any conversation!

Developed by:

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