

People First Language

Many non-disabled people worry about using language that may be unacceptable to people with disabilities, aware that the issue can be a sensitive one. The appropriate use of language is less to do with 'political correctness' than a desire not to reinforce negative images, incorrect assumptions and stereotypes associated with people with disabilities. People with disabilities generally don't worry a bit about the words you use – but are concerned about the attitudes people express towards them.

People with disabilities have identified a vocabulary that they feel is appropriate to use and it is a matter of simple courtesy to use terms which they prefer. All language is constantly evolving, and, in this case, the simplest way is to ask the person with the disability themselves.

- Use 'person with a disability' rather than 'handicapped' which has its origins in 'cap in hand', with implications of charity and begging
- Remember that we are talking about people; the term 'the disabled' is impersonal and implies a group separate from the rest of society.
- Avoid attaching labels to people with disabilities. Labels are for jars – not people!
- Don't describe people by the condition they have. An 'arthritic' is a person with arthritis, a 'spastic' or 'epileptic' is a person who has cerebral palsy or epilepsy.
- Don't use negative images; 'suffering from...', 'a victim of...', 'crippled by...', 'afflicted by...' is better expressed as 'a person with (condition)'.

Words to Avoid

Cripple, invalid, handicapped
Mentally retarded, mentally handicapped
Deaf aid
Deaf and dumb
Confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound
Autistic Child
Hyperactive kid

Appropriate Alternatives

Person with a disability
Person with a cognitive disability
Hearing aid
Deaf, profoundly deaf
Wheelchair user
Child with Autism
Child with ADHD

Adapted from Through the Roof in the UK



People First Language

This is the language we recommend using on the back of any volunteer role descriptions you may use in your family ministry. We use this in our FREERESPITE ministry resources.

In order to ensure that we are cultivating an inclusive ministry we wanted to make sure we are all using People First Language. Using People First Language downplays misperceptions that people with disabilities are primarily needy and dependent. Using phrases like “child with autism” or “person with disabilities” puts the focus on the fact that they are a person, and are not defined by the disability that they happen to have.

Words can be hurtful, and often this comes out of a lack of knowledge regarding the respectful way to refer to someone. We want to make this as easy as possible so we thought we would go over some language to avoid.

Offensive Terms Include

- Retarded
- Crippled
- Deformed
- “Suffers from”
- “Victim of”
- Handicapped
- Infirm
- Deaf and Dumb
- Epileptic, Diabetic, Autistic
- Wheelchair-bound
- Handicapable
- Mentally Different
- Physically Inconvenienced
- Pitiful
- Unfortunate
- Diseased
- A Patient, Case, Consumer, or Client
- Able-bodied
- Slow

Simply stated, first describe the person, then attach any descriptive language; always putting the person first. (i.e. “Our friend William who has Autism.”)





People First Language

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Please keep in touch! We would LOVE to hear from you.

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