**Watch Your Words: They Affect Others**

**A Final Word**

This, people with disabilities will tell you, is the first step toward full acceptance as contributing members of society. It is one of the ways they can let their fellow citizens know that they are not broken – that for them, having a disability is a natural, not a selected, way of life.

People first language also prevents the tendency to reduce the person to the disability. When words alone define a person, the result is a label … a label that almost always reinforces the barriers created by negative and stereotypical attitudes.

As a minority, people with disabilities know something most of us fail to recognize – what you see is not necessarily what you get. While people with disabilities and their advocates are working hard to end the very real discrimination and segregation in education, employment and participation in community activities, all of us must strive to eliminate the prejudicial language that creates barriers to inclusion in the mainstream of society.

We cannot always control our thoughts, but we can control our words.

Like paint on a canvas, words create a powerful image. The question is whether we want that image to be a straightforward, positive view of people with disabilities or an insensitive portrayal that reinforces common myths and is a form of discrimination.

**Words are the only things that last forever**

People with disabilities know all too well that words create opportunities or build barriers. Man or woman, adult or child, it’s something they’ve dealt with every day of their lives.

For too long, words have separated and isolated people with disabilities. They’ve heard them all – idiot, retard, handicapped, fragile, mentally weak, weird, deformed, moron, imbecile, cripple, mongoloid, spastic, feebleminded, brain damaged – and on and on and on.

**Watch your thoughts for they become words. Choose your words for they become actions.**

Time after time people with disabilities have been identified not as a person, but as a problem. They’ve heard terms like “afflicted with,” “crippled by,” “suffers from,” and “a victim of.” They’ve been pitied or praised because of their “battle” to overcome their “handicap.” To paraphrase writer George Orwell, if thought corrupts language then language can corrupt thought. Put another way, the words we choose reflect our attitudes.

That’s why people with disabilities prefer “people first language.” What, exactly, is people first language?

Simply put, people first language uses words in a way that identifies the person before their so-called problem.

**People First Language**

Following are examples of the dos and don’ts in the use of people first language.

Put the person first when writing or speaking about people with disabilities! Stay away from labels like the blind, the deaf or the disabled. They do not reflect the individuality, equality or dignity of people with disabilities. So, with all this in mind, when referring to a person with a disability …

Say or write this:

* She is a person with a disability
* He is an individual without a disability
* They are children (kids) without disabilities He is a person with a cognitive disability She is an individual with autism
* He needs behavior supports
* She is a person with a learning disability He uses a wheelchair
* She has a physical disability He has a brain injury
* She has a congenital disability
* He is a person with mental retardation
* She is a person who is blind or visually impaired He is a person who is deaf or hard of hearing She is an individual with (or who has) multiple sclerosis or muscular dystrophy
* He is a person with cerebral palsy She is an individual with epilepsy
* He is a person with a psychiatric disability
* He is a person who uses an assistive speech device or is unable to speak

Instead of this:

* She is handicapped or disabled He is able-bodied
* They are normal or healthy children (kids) He's retarded
* She's autistic
* He has behavior problems She's learning disabled
* He's confined to a wheelchair She's a quadriplegic or a cripple He's brain damaged
* She suffers from a birth defect
* He's a retard or mentally defective The blind
* He suffers a hearing loss or from being deaf
* She is afflicted by MS or MD He is a victim of CP
* She is an epileptic He is crazy, nuts, etc.
* He is dumb or a mute

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