



People First Language

Language shapes and reinforces our attitudes toward others. Therefore, the words that many people use to describe individuals with disabilities must change before these citizens are viewed as equal members of our society.

Disability labels focus on what the individual cannot do rather than the person's abilities. People First Language looks at the individual before the disability. A disability is something that an individual has, not what an individual is.

Here are some examples of People First Language:

- Adam is a young boy who has cerebral palsy.
- Jason is a thirteen-year-old with a learning disability.
- Alex is a kindergartner and has autism.
- A family has a son with Down Syndrome.
- Lucy uses a wheelchair.

Notice how much more positive People First Language sounds than saying a CP boy, a learning disabled teen, an autistic kindergartner, a Downs son, or a wheelchair bound girl.

As our language changes, perceptions and attitudes also change. People First Language helps in the movement toward the acceptance, respect, and inclusion of individuals with disabilities.

If you do not know what to say, ask the person who has the disability to help put you at ease. Just ask what term makes them feel comfortable. Respect their language and remember, they are the experts.

Consider the following introduction of a friend who does not have a disability. "This is my good friend, Molly Stone. She grew up in Maine and has always loved art. Now she works as a landscape painter. She also is taking an Italian cooking class." Molly sounds like an interesting person. We are now able to talk about Maine, painting or Italian food. Molly's introduction was positive and it did not say what she cannot do or include negative information.

Why should the introduction of a friend who just happens to have a disability be any different? How would it sound if we introduced a friend with a disability as, "Her name is Kelly. She is retarded, but she can talk though. And, she is an epileptic too." What a showstopper. How can anyone build on this? No one wants to be identified by something they cannot do or control.

All individuals are made up of several characteristics. An individual's disability is just one part of them. People First Language takes the focus off of the disability and places it back on the individual.