

The formula is simple – put the person before the problem and you get a positive perception.

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 being disabled 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 the nation's last minority, people with disabilities know something most of us fail to recognize – what you see is not necessarily what you get. While people with dis-

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

abilities 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 create barriers to inclusion in the mainstream of society.

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.

And one more thing – let's not talk about "special needs," anymore. The needs of a person with a disability aren't special to him or her.

Arkansas  
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# Watch Your Words

They  
Affect  
Others

A stylized illustration in shades of blue and white showing several people in business suits and dresses. They are depicted in profile or three-quarter view, engaged in conversation. Some are gesturing with their hands, and one is holding a book or folder. The overall style is clean and modern.

# 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 been used to separate and isolate people with disabilities. They've heard them all – idiot, retard, handicapped, fragile, mentally weak, weird, deformed, moron, dumbbell, brain dead, imbecile, cripple, mongoloid, spastic, feeble-minded, brain damaged, drip, stupid – 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.

# A Final Word

Following are examples of the do's and don't's in the use of people first language.

One more time, 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 an person with a psychiatric disability

She is a person who no longer lives in an institution

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 victim of CP

She is an epileptic

He is crazy, nuts, etc.

She is deinstitutionalized says she/he has a disability

He is dumb or a mute