

The Power of Language: **Speak** and Write Using "Person First"

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The words or phrases people speak and write plus the order in which they are sequenced greatly affects the images that are formed about individuals with disabilities and the negative or positive impressions that result.

A group of children on a school outing entered the department store with excitement. One young man worked his way through an aisle of clothing. While the going was slow, he mastered the challenge and found the football jerseys. His teacher gave him a "high-five" for his accomplishments of maneuvering his wheelchair and locating the "sporting goods" department. This student who has cerebral palsy had a successful outing with his classmates.

The language used in this scenario promotes a positive image of a young man who is on an outing with classmates trying to find the football jerseys. Oh yes, he happens to have a disability! Compare this to the following scene:

A group of handicapped children on a field trip with their normal classmates entered the department store with excitement. One wheelchair-bound young man who suffers from cerebral palsy struggled as he maneuvered his wheelchair through the clothes. His teacher praised his efforts in finding the football jerseys in the sporting goods department.

The language describing this scenario procreates an immediate image of a young man sitting in a wheelchair with a disability. By using the word *handicapped* early in the narrative to describe the children, the reader conjures up an immediate image, based on his or her past experiences, of someone who is "handicapped". The remaining words elude to his limited capabilities because of his disability. With this choice of language, it is difficult to get past the disability and recognize

the abilities that are evident. This scenario creates a negative image by the very choice of words and confuses the person with a condition.

Over 500 million people in the world have disabilities because of mental, physical, or sensory impairments (Strand, 1992). According to the National Organization of Disability, more than 40 million Americans have disabilities that interfere with the major tasks of daily life (Tyler, 1990). People with disabilities are included into society more than at any other time in history. What language do you use when you speak about a person with a disability? In the past, a variety of terms, labels, and descriptors have been used which often were derogatory and tended to perpetuate negative attitudes and false stereotypes. Too often language has been used that portrayed people with disabilities in "stereotypical, imprecise or devaluing ways" (Hadley & Martin, 1988, p. 147).

Language is a reflection of how people in a society see each other. Historically, persons with disabilities were viewed with sympathy, sometimes as pathetic, and occasionally even with horror. Individuals with disabilities were often hidden from society which meant the rest of the people did not have the opportunity to understand the disabilities and more importantly to see them as people first and recognize the abilities of this population. With little education available to children with disabilities, they did not have the opportunity to develop to their fullest capabilities.

In the United States, Public Law 94-142, The Education for all Handicapped Act (EHA) was passed in 1975. This law ensured a free, appropriate, public education to people with disabilities ages 3 to 21 years (Federal Register, 2975). For the first time, individuals with disabilities had the opportunity for an appropriate education with some of this training occurring in mainstream classrooms.

26 What It Means to Be Disabled

It became apparent that students with disabilities had the capabilities to develop skills that could be utilized in society. We are now becoming more aware of the contributions that people with disabilities have given to society. Respect for these individuals is steadily increasing.

Stereotyping sex, race, and disability through language usage is very pervasive and can have a negative effect on society's perceptions of persons with disabilities as well as affect the self-image of individuals with disabilities (Froschel, Colon, Rubin, & Sprung, 1984). Stereotypic language can send a negative message of alienation and apartness and can limit the aspirations of persons with disabilities and lead them to doubt their self-worth (Slapin, 1990). Whereas, in a positive verbal environment the words used by adults can make the children feel like valued members of society (Kostechnik, Stein, & Whiren, 1988). The language used to describe someone with a disability may be particularly influential to individuals who have had no exposure or experiences with people with disabilities.

The words that are utilized to describe individuals convey individual and/or societal prejudices toward a specific group of people. Stereotyping persons with disabilities occurs when using words such as "handicapped" which originated from a begging term meaning "cap-in-hand" or the word "cripple" which is derived from the term "creep". Using words such as "confined" to a wheelchair becomes inappropriate as in reality the wheelchair is a liberating vehicle which allows the person to move around independently (Foschl, et al., 1984). Words such as these conjure up feelings of pity and uselessness and perpetuate stereotypes.

In recent years, there has been a strong movement toward emphasizing the need to accept diversity of all people as the demographics around the world are changing. While the concept of diversity includes persons with and without disability (Derman-Sparks, 1989), the emphasis of this movement has been diversity of culture. This is evidenced through growing numbers of recently published adult and children's books with multicultural themes, antibias curricula

emerging in the classrooms, and numerous attempts of language changes in reference to minority groups (i.e. Blacks as African American; Indians as Native Americans). These same revisions and additions need to be made in relationship to individuals with disabilities including language changes that demonstrate respect.

According to the results of a study by Foschl et al. (1984), many teachers have become aware of racial and ethnic slurs and do not allow children to use them. However, these teachers admitted they were less aware of sex and disability bias in language and indicated a need to become more aware of the words they use which may be promoting disability bias. According to Steer (1979), attitudes of school staff toward persons with disabilities are translated primarily through the language used. Also, the degree to which children are able to perceive themselves as competent and worthy, or the opposite, is heavily influenced by the verbalizations used by their teachers (Kostechnik, et al., 1988). Studies have found that labeling of students does affect teacher expectations which in turn affects student progress (Gillung & Rucker, 1977). While labeling is often needed to access services, with these findings it makes it very important that we be respectful and cautious in their use.

Children's attitudes can be shaped by the words they hear or read (Byrnes, 1987). Because of the influence of print media on society, children with disabilities need to hear and see themselves referred to in a positive way, in order to see themselves as important individuals in society. It is the responsibility of all caring adults to select materials that portray persons with disabilities in a realistic manner. This then becomes the message that will be sent to all children and can help end the stereotype of persons with disabilities not being productive citizens. It is with information such as this that stereotyping can be stopped.

In this media-influenced society, the press can have an enormous impact on society's knowledge, attitudes, and public policies regarding individuals with disabilities. "This influence can, at its best, enhance knowledge and promote social awareness of

disabilities. At its worse, it can promulgate misinformation and reinforce negative stereotypes (Keller, Hallahan, McShane, Crowley, & Blandford, 1990, p. 217).

Keller, et al (1990) conducted a national study of American newspapers to check the premise that the press's coverage has provided a less than ideal picture of individuals with disabilities and disability issues. The results of their study indicated that 48% of the references that described disabilities had a negative impact with only 1% of the references having a positive impact. When the newspapers portrayal was negative, the focus was on the person's general, physical, and social-emotional well-being. Whereas, positive dimensions which relate the individual who has the disability to his or her family or to society received very little coverage. Unbalanced coverage such as this reinforces stereotypic images of people who have disabilities. Their strengths and contributions to society go unseen. Negative portrayals are offensive to persons who have disabilities and have the potential to affect the reader's perceptions, and possible actions, toward individuals with disabilities.

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

The use of words or expressions when referring to persons with disabilities are very subtle and might seem unimportant. However, "when one considers that language is a primary means of communicating attitudes, thoughts, and feelings...the elimination of words and expressions that stereotype becomes an essential pmi of creating an inclusive environment" (Froschl, et al., 1984, p.20).

"PERSON FIRST" LANGUAGE

The philosophy of using person first language demonstrates respect for people with disabilities by referring to them first as individuals, and then referring to their disability when it is needed. This philosophy demonstrates respect by emphasizing what people can do by focusing on their ability rather than their disability and by distinguishing the person from the disability.

This philosophy was first adopted by TASH, The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps (Bailey, 1992). Since that time, many disability groups and advocacy organizations have published similar information in an attempt to educate the public regarding "person first" language. People with disabilities have also been vocal about this issue. Perske (1988) tells of a woman who stood up at a meeting and said, "We are tired of being seen first as handicapped, or retarded, or developmentally disabled. We want to be seen as people first". (p. 5). It is important to avoid giving a disability more prominence than it deserves. "Most people who have disabilities forget about them much of the time" (Hadley & Brodwin, 1988. p. 147).

Using the expression "the blind child" makes the disability the most important attribute about the child, while saying, "the child who is blind" takes the focus away from the disability, making the disability but one descriptor. While this order of reference is more awkward, it is more respectful of persons with disabilities. According to Kailes (1985), this order is preferred as a "psychologically sounder expression" (p.68).

Individuals who have disabilities, their families and friends are particularly aware of words and phrases that convey stereotyping attitudes (Hanft, 1989). support groups and advocacy coalitions (i.e. United Cerebral Palsy, National Easter Seal Society, Parent Advocacy Coalition of Educational Rights (PACER)) are educating families about the philosophy of "person first" language and are encouraging its use. A college student shared with her classmates the following story which had happened to her while making a home visit. Without thinking, the teacher referred to the child with who she was working as a "handicapped" child. A teenager sister happened to be home and heard the teacher's language. The teenager challenged the teacher and asked, "Why did you call my sister a handicapped child when really she is a little girl who happens to have a handicap?" Somewhere this teenager had heard or read about "person first" language. Families like the respect this philosophy affords their family member who has the disability and are likely

28 What It Means to Be Disabled

to challenge professionals who are not changing their language (Blaska, 1991).

To keep the "person first" philosophy in perspective, consider how you might introduce one of your friends who does not have a disability. You would use that person's name first and then perhaps tell where he or she lives, works, and so forth. Why should it be any different for someone who has a disability? Everyone is made up of many attributes and most people do not want to be identified by any one characteristic (Pacesetter, 1989). While a disability may create challenges, the need for information or assistance, it does not define a person's entire existence (Hanft, 1989). A disability should be represented in its proper perspective. If the disability is totally irrelevant, reference to it may be omitted entirely (Hadley & Brodwin, 1988).

Examples of "Person First" Language:

<i>Use This:</i>	<i>Instead of This:</i>
• child with a disability man who is blind	disabled child the blind man
• child with Down syndrome	Down Syndrome Child
• boy with a physical disability	crippled boy
• girl who is deaf and cannot speak	deaf and dumb girl
• babies addicted to crack	crack babies
• person with epilepsy	epileptic
• child with retardation	retarded child
• man who has quadriplegia or paralysis of both arms and legs	quadriplegic

DISABILITY VS HANDICAPPED

Whether to use "disability" or "handicap" has been an on-going controversy. A disability is defined as a condition of the person, either emotional or physical. Whereas, a handicap is the cumulative result of the barriers imposed by society which come between an individual and the environment of an activity which the person wants to do (Hadley & Brodwin, 1988; Kailes, 1985; Wright, 1960).

A disability does not have to be a handicap! A disability may mean "that a person may do something a little bit differently from a person who does not have a disability, but with equal participation and equal results" (Kailes, 1985, p. 68).

<i>Use This:</i>	<i>Instead of This:</i>
• the boy with a disability	handicapped boy
• children with disabilities	handicapped children
• peers without disabilities	non handicapped peers
• disabling conditions	handicapping conditions

NORMAL CHILD OR PERSON

The difficulty with using the term "normal" to refer to a person without a disability is the inference that a person with a disability is "abnormal" or "not normal". While a person with a disability may have some abnormal development, he or she is not an "abnormal" person. When referring to what is "normal" or inferring what is "abnormal", be careful to indicate you are talking or writing about development and not a person or program.

<i>Use This:</i>	<i>Instead of This:</i>
• normal development	normal child
• normally developing	normal child
• child without a disability	normal child
• refer to specific development: i.e., normal eyesight, normal, hearing	
• mainstream classroom	normal classroom
• refer to specific classroom i.e., first-grade classroom	
• children without disabilities	normal children or normal peers

WORDS TO AVOID

Avoid words that have negative or judgmental connotations (Tyler, 1990). Words such as these fail to demonstrate respect and do not recognize the person's strengths and abilities. The following words should be avoided as they create images of people who are less able and are to be pitied. Words such as these perpetuate negative stereotypes of people with disabilities (United Cerebral Palsy: Hanft, 1989).

Avoid using words such as these:

afflicted	confined
crippled	drain or burden
stricken	poor
suffers from	unfortunate
victim	disease

DISABILITY OR DISEASE

A disability is not a disease. Often individuals with disabilities are very healthy. Words such as patients, cases or symptoms should be avoided unless talking or writing about someone's health or medical condition.

PORTRAYAL

People with disabilities should "be portrayed as actively going about the business of living as other people do, *not* as passive victims, tragic figures, or super-heroes" (Hadley & Brodwin, 1988).

CATEGORIZING PEOPLE

Avoid grouping people with disabilities into categories such as "the retarded". "the handicapped" (Hanft, 1989), "Do we really see children as individuals, or do we say, for example, that all children with Down Syndrome are warm, friendly, happy and will never be able to read?" (Steer, 1979, p.40).

Use This

- people with disabilities the disabled
- people with retardation the retarded

Instead of This:

- people with disabilities the handicapped
- individuals with hearing impairments the deaf
- children with visual impairments the blind

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

Usually a form of the verb "to have" is the most effective way of expressing the link between a person and a disability (Hadley & Brodwin, 1988). "A person is a human being and should not be confused with a condition" (Tyler, 1990, p.65).

Use This:

- has autism
- had cerebral palsy or
- has spastic muscles
- has epilepsy
- has retardation

Instead of This:

- is autistic
- is cerebral palsied
- is CP
- is spastic
- is an epileptic
- is retarded

Assistive devices, prostheses, and wheelchairs are examples of equipment and devices that people use to assist them in their life activities (i.e., wheelchairs enable individuals to escape confinement) (Hadley & Brodwin, 1988; RTC/IL, 1990).

Use This:

- uses a wheelchair
- walks with crutches
- walks with braces

Instead of:

- confined to a wheelchair
- is on or has to use
- uses braces

Some thoughts about using the word "special": "Special" is a word actively utilized in regards to persons with disabilities (i.e., special education, special buses, special needs). About using this word, "Pershe (1988) stresses: "Being seen as special might not be so bad. if you're a top celebrity or the national champion" (p.59). But, if you've been singled out as not...normal, given a label, excluded from full participation, exist in out of the way residences, or attend "out of the real world programs" when you felt you wanted to live "in the middle of things", "calling you special

30 What It Means to Be Disabled

might only add to the wound you already feel" (p. 59). While all persons with disabilities may not be offended by the use of "special", Pershe's comments serve as a reminder to choose your words carefully and always speak with respect to all people.

MOVEMENTS TOWARD 'PERSON FIRST' LANGUAGE

Business Communication:

Tyler (1990) advocates incorporating "people first" language into business communication courses. Tyler emphasizes that the numbers of Americans with disabilities entering the workplace continues to increase. Yet, few textbooks used in business communication even mention the subject of how to communicate appropriately about people with disabilities. According to Tyler, "people first" language could fit in with the discussions of linguistic sexism and how to avoid it, racism, and other possible biases which are already included. Tyler indicated that the book, Without Bias: A Guidebook for Nondiscriminatory Communication might be a helpful resource in courses such as this as it provides suggestions for avoiding bias with regard to race, ethnicity, gender, age and does include disability. The focus of this guidebook is on-the-job situations and provides illustrations and sample sentences which could be used.

Professional Journals:

Some professional journals are now requiring that authors use "person first" language in order for their articles to be considered for publication. For example, in the Journal of Early Intervention, the Guidelines for Authors instruct authors accordingly: "In describing the subjects of studies or in referring to infants, children, and other individuals with disabilities, authors must place the disability descriptor after the child or adult descriptor. This policy follows the precedent established by the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps in placing

the child before the handicap in sentence structure" (Bailey, 1992).

Laws and Statutes:

While the United States legal and political systems had favored the word "handicapped" and had not demonstrated a sensitivity toward person first language, some changes have recently occurred. On October 30, 1990 the president signed into law The Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1990. One of the significant changes was to give the law a new title to reflect "person first" language: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). At that time, the legislation instructed that the entire statute be amended to make the language changes which utilized the word "disability" and "person first" language (Walsh, 1990).

Some states have followed the federal government's lead. For example, in 1991 the Minnesota legislature passed a bill to make all MN statues reflect "person first" language and "disability" was to replace all reference to "handicap". The directive concluded with, "It is extremely important that we not only build in respect and dignity toward people with disabilities in our statutes, but that these attitudes become second nature within our everyday language" (Henry, 1991). another example is that new "Handicapped Parking" signs will now use the term "disability" (Minnesota State Council on Disabilities, Personal Communication, December, 1992). While this does not make the language "person first", it does make a change in utilizing more respectful language and is a step in the right direction.

Preservice Training:

In preservice training, some professors are training professionals who will be working with individuals with disabilities and their families to use the preferred "person first" language. For example, at a state university in the midwest in an undergraduate class of 32 special education teachers and speech/language clinicians, the professor began the ten-week course with a discussion of

"person first" language. Activities about "person first" language were done in class, handouts were provided, and the professor modeled this philosophy throughout the quarter. The students were told that the expectations for the class would be that everyone would try and use "person first" language when speaking in class. The professor and classmates would remind each other in a non threatening manner and reinforce one another. "Person first" language was also required in all written work. After ten weeks of class, the final written projects displayed 100% success using "person first" language. At the conclusion of the course, some students were still forgetting to reverse the referent when speaking. However, in most cases the students were self-correcting. They were actually hearing the miscue and correcting their expression to make it "person first". The changes demonstrated by the students in this class clearly indicate that preservice training can be effective in promoting "person first" language and changing old habits.

SUMMARY

The utilization of "person first" language demonstrates acceptance and respect for differences among people as we speak and write and in turn can have a positive effect upon society. While it is not easy to change old habits, it can be done. Professionals who work with individuals with disabilities should ask themselves: How do I refer to the children or students with whom I work? When I speak to parents, how do I refer to their child and his or her disability? When I speak to colleagues how do I refer to the children? When I write, what order do I place my words when referring to a person with a disability? When the wording becomes cumbersome, do I persevere and refuse to use hasty short cuts that lack respect? Have you made the change? (Blaska, 1991). We can help individuals with disabilities develop positive self-esteem by referring to them in words that acknowledge ability, merit and dignity (United Cerebral Palsy).

What image do you have of the new family that just moved into the neighborhood?—

"Hi, Mom! I called to tell you about the new family that just moved in next door! We're so lucky to have a family with young children about the ages of Tommy and Mindy. They will all be going to the same school in the fall. won't that be neat for the children to have friends while waiting for the bus. Yes, they have three children all two years apart. The boys will probably play ball with Tommy and their Sara might go to Brownies with Mindy. As you can tell, I'm really excited about the new neighbors".

Mindy has Down syndrome but the disability wasn't mentioned in this telephone conversation! The essence of a "person first" philosophy has been achieved when the disability is not the first characteristic identified and is mentioned only when the disability is or becomes a significant factor.

Words are "powerful tools by which a civilization perpetuates its values—both its proudest achievements and its most crippling prejudices (Radloff, 1974, p. 8). Words and phrases and the attitudes they perpetuate are often the greatest handicap an individual must overcome (Maine D.D. Council, 1990). We have a choice to continue to send negative messages which will be harmful to persons with and without disabilities or we can accept the challenge and CHANGE OUR LANGUAGE which has the potential to positively impact society.

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32 What It Means to Be Disabled

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