

# People First Language

A Guide for Writing and Speaking About People Who Live with Disabilities



**NCCDD**  
North Carolina Council on  
Developmental Disabilities

## Distinction Between Disability and Handicap\*\*

- A Disability is a condition caused by an accident, trauma, genetics or disease, which may limit a person's mobility, hearing, vision, speech or mental function. Some people with disabilities have more than one disability.
- A Handicap is a physical or attitudinal constraint that is imposed upon a person, regardless of whether that person has a disability. Webster's defines handicap as "to put at a disadvantage."
- Example: Some people with disabilities use wheelchairs. Stairs, narrow doorways and curbs are handicaps imposed upon people who use wheelchairs.

\*\*Disability Handbook, City of San Antonio, TX. [www.sanantonio.gov/planning/disability\\_handbook/deh1.asp](http://www.sanantonio.gov/planning/disability_handbook/deh1.asp)

## Tips for Reporting on People with Disabilities\*\*

- **Do not focus on disability** unless it is crucial to a story. Focus instead on issues that affect the quality of life of those same individuals, such as accessible transportation, housing, affordable health care, employment opportunities or discrimination.
- **Do not portray successful people with disabilities as superhuman.** This raises false expectations that all people with disabilities should be high achievers.
- **Do not sensationalize a disability** by using such language as "afflicted with," "crippled," "suffers from," "confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound" etc.
- **Do not use generic labels for disability groups** such as "the retarded" or "the deaf."
- Do not define individuals by their disability. **Put People First**, not their disability.
- **Emphasize abilities**, not limitations. Show people as active participants in society.
- After the first People First Language reference, it's alright to use "disabled person" as a secondary reference.
- **Do not use euphemisms** to describe a disability.

\*\*University of Kansas, Publications, Research and Training Center on Independent Living

## What is People First Language?

People First Language is a way of communicating that reflects respect for people with disabilities by choosing words that portray them accurately. Emphasis is placed on the person first, rather than the disability. The focus/subject is the person.

These words and expressions are currently preferred and reflect a positive attitude. Some language is "trendy" and meanings may vary depending on the context. The ideal is to incorporate these words into our language in a way that first and foremost, expresses the dignity of the person.

Blind; blindness

Low vision; person with low vision

Vision impaired

Disabled (secondary reference)

Person with cerebral palsy

Person with a disability

Person with developmental disabilities; developmentally disabled

Person with paraplegia

Psychological/emotional disability

Wheelchair-user or uses a wheelchair

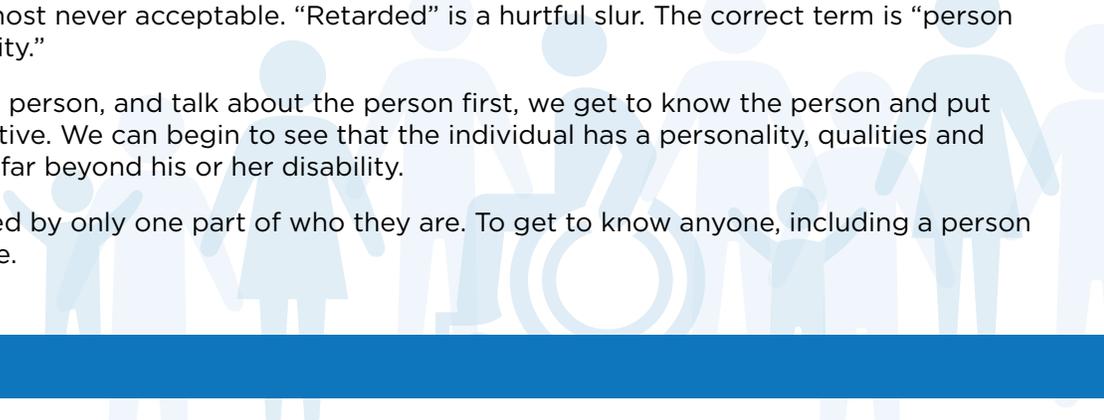
Not all people with disabilities agree on which language or terminology is preferred like any other large, yet identifiable group of people. Individuals will vary as to how they refer to themselves and how they would like you to refer to them.



## Tips for Seeing People First

- Talk directly to the person with the disability and maintain eye contact, even when the person is using an interpreter or a direct support professional.
- Encourage the person with the disability to express his or her own thoughts, even if others try to speak for the individual.
- If you offer assistance to the person with a disability and he or she says “No thanks,” respect the person’s ability to handle the circumstances.
- Use a normal tone of voice. If the person cannot hear, or understand you, he or she will let you know.
- When speaking with a person with an intellectual disability, speak in clear, short, direct sentences. To be certain that you’ve communicated effectively, ask the person to repeat the idea back to you in their own words.
- In social settings, treat a person with a disability in the same way as anyone else.
- Use the same conversational terms, such as “see,” “hear,” and “look” for a person who is blind. It is all right to use terms such as “let’s walk over,” even when the person uses a wheelchair.
- When talking with a person using a wheelchair, if possible, sit next to the individual so you are at the same level. However, don’t kneel down.
- Be mindful if an assistive animal or “seeing eye dog” is on duty. Petting or otherwise distracting the animal is not okay unless the owner approves.
- Encourage others to interact with people with disabilities. Open, informed interaction helps overcome fear and stereotypes. People with disabilities are their own best spokespeople.
- Disability is a normal part of life.

## Think People First

- **A PERSON** is someone with autism or polio...one is not afflicted by it.
  - **A PERSON** uses a wheelchair or is someone with a disability...one is not crippled, confined to a wheelchair, or wheelchair-bound.
  - **THE PERSON** has hearing loss or uses an alternative listening device...and is not deaf and dumb, or a deaf mute.
  - **THE PERSON** has epilepsy, or has a seizure disorder...and is not spastic or an epileptic.
  - **THE PERSON** is someone with Down Syndrome...not a Mongoloid.
  - **THE CHILD** has a disability or has a chronic illness...not a special needs child or a special person.
  - He or she is **A PERSON** with a disability or someone with an intellectual or other developmental disability, not “mentally challenged,” “physically challenged,” “intellectually deficient,” or “retarded.” “Mental retardation” is almost never acceptable. “Retarded” is a hurtful slur. The correct term is “person with an intellectual disability.”
  - When we begin to see the person, and talk about the person first, we get to know the person and put the disability into perspective. We can begin to see that the individual has a personality, qualities and interests— all of which go far beyond his or her disability.
  - No one wants to be defined by only one part of who they are. To get to know anyone, including a person with a disability, takes time.
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## People-First Language Preferred Expressions:

| Say/Write...                       | Instead of...                         |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Child with a disability            | handicapped or disabled               |
| Individual with Cerebral Palsy     | palsied, CP or spastic                |
| Person who has...                  | Afflicted, suffers from, victim of    |
| Nonverbal (with speech)            | mute or dumb                          |
| Child(ren) with autism             | autistic                              |
| Developmental delay                | slow or retarded                      |
| Emotional disorder/mental illness  | crazy or insane                       |
| Deaf or has a hearing impairment   | deaf and dumb                         |
| Communicates with sign language    | signer                                |
| Uses a wheelchair                  | confined to a wheelchair              |
| Has a cognitive; with disabilities | retarded                              |
| He has epilepsy                    | epileptic                             |
| Adult with Down syndrome           | mongoloid, suffers from Down syndrome |
| Has a learning disability          | is learning disabled                  |
| Has a physical disability          | is physically disabled/crippled       |
| Non-disabled                       | normal, healthy                       |
| Congenital disability              | birth defect                          |
| Condition                          | disease (unless it IS)                |
| Seizures                           | fits                                  |
| Cleft lip                          | hare lip                              |
| Has mobility impairment            | lame or crippled                      |
| Paralyzed                          | invalid or paralytic                  |
| Has quadriplegia                   | quadriplegic                          |
| Has paraplegia                     | paraplegic                            |

The NCCDD has an ongoing commitment to raise public awareness, promote public policy, strengthen self-advocacy skills and provide information that encourages the full inclusion of people with developmental disabilities into community life.

**North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities**

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