

“PEOPLE FIRST” LANGUAGE

adapted from materials by Kathie Snow

What is our nation’s largest minority group—one that is also the most inclusive of all ages, genders, religions, ethnicities, sexual orientation and socioeconomic levels? The answer is: people with disabilities. What they all have in common is being on the receiving end of social misunderstanding, prejudice and discrimination. And ironically it is a group that any of us, even those who misunderstand, discriminate or have prejudices, can join *at any time*: at birth, in the split second of an accident, through illness or during the aging process. If and when it happens to you, how will you want to be described?

What does it say when we describe someone as the “gimpy lady,” the “cripple,” the “blind guy” or “retarded”? What it says, and what we’ve done, is to totally disregard the *personhood* of the individual—all of the personality, talents, spiritual gifts, hopes and aspirations that make up a person—and have seen and categorized the individual solely on the basis of his disability, his/her medical diagnosis.

“**People First**” Language puts the person before the disability, describing what the person has, not who the person is. Are you cancerous or do you have cancer? Is a person handicapped or disabled, or do they have a disability? If we are thought of in these terms – as being the disease or disability - we are robbed of a basic right, the right to define ourselves, by our actions and character, not just by an obvious outward trait.

A person’s self-image is tied to the words that other use about her/him. Words can hurt, and words can uplift. How many times have you said “If they (or if you) only knew the real me!” We may not be used to employing “**People First**” Language, and it is easy to dismiss it as mere political correctness - but when we use language that respects and honors others, we can be a blessing to them and reflect an inclusive and welcoming attitude through our words.

COMPLETE THE EXERCISE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THIS SHEET

then refer to these “better ways to phrase” for the answers

- The handicapped or disabled—*People with disabilities*
- He’s mentally retarded—*He has a cognitive disability/diagnosis*
- She’s autistic—*She has autism (or a diagnosis of...)*
- He’s downs/a mongoloid—*He has Down syndrome (or a diagnosis of...)*
- She’s learning disabled—*She has a learning disability*
- He’s a quadriplegic/crippled—*He has a physical disability*
- She’s a dwarf/midget—*She is short of stature/she’s a little person*
- He’s wheelchair bound—*He uses a wheelchair/mobility chair*
- She’s developmentally delayed—*She has a developmental delay*
- He’s in special ed.—*He received (receives) special education services*
- Normal kids/Healthy Kids—*Children without disabilities*
- He’s nonverbal—*He communicates with his eyes, gestures, a device, etc.*
- Birth defect—*Congenital disability*
- Brain damaged—*Has a brain injury*
- Handicapped parking/hotel room—*accessible parking/hotel room*

HAVE QUESTIONS OR NEED CLARIFICATION? ASK US at **VOICE OF CARE 630.231.3862**

Exercise in Crafting “People First” Language

Read the description, reasoning behind and explanation of “**People First**” Language on the other side of this sheet. With this insight, try the exercise below. When finished, look at the other side again for suggested “better ways to phrase” alternatives. Questions? Let’s talk!

Column 1 has common statements that are **NOT** “People First” Language is **not** in use. In the Column 2 blank, fill in a preferred alternative.

COLUMN 1

COLUMN 2

The handicapped or disabled

He’s mentally retarded

She’s autistic

He’s down’s/a mongoloid

She’s learning disabled

He’s a quadriplegic/crippled

She’s a dwarf/midget

He’s wheelchair bound

She’s developmentally delayed

He’s in special ed

Normal kids/healthy kids

He’s non-verbal

Birth defect

Brain damaged

Handicapped parking/hotel room

