

Disability Campaign.org

Disability Language Guidelines

“Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never harm me.” Whoever created this children’s rhyme probably did not consider the power of words — particularly, hurtful words—towards people with disabilities. Although legal efforts are made to protect people with disabilities, many in our society use hurtful and thoughtless words in common speech that debase those with disabilities.



There are ways in which you can refer to a person’s illness or disability without using derogatory and offensive language. What’s more, you can build up a person with a disability by using encouraging language when speaking to and of him/her. As an ancient proverb says, “A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold and settings of silver.” Below are some recommendations for you to consider when speaking to and/or of people with disabilities.

1. **Use people first language.** People first language recognizes that an individual is a person, a human being, or citizen first, and that the disability is a part, but not all of him/her. Avoid using nouns as adjectives to describe someone with a disability.

Don't say	Do Say
The Down syndrome girl	The girl with Down syndrome
Autistic people	People with autism, on the autism spectrum

2. **Avoid hurtful terms.** Don't use description such as "brain-damaged," "slow learner," or "retarded." Avoid using "dwarf or midget" or words that were once used, but are no longer appropriate today, such as "Mongol."

Don't say	Do Say
Schizo	Mental illness
Slow learner, retarded	Has a learning disability

3. **Emphasize abilities, not limitations.** Similarly, do not use emotional descriptors that convey that people with disabilities should be pitied.

Don't say	Do Say
Burn victim	Burn survivor
Confined to a wheelchair	Uses a wheelchair

4. **Don't assume "something happened" to the person that made him/her result with a disability.** Not every wheelchair user has a disability as a result of an accident; likewise, a person's use of mobility equipment may not be the result of a disease. A child with severe disabilities is not always the result of a parent that did something wrong or inappropriate.

Don't say	Do Say
What happened to you?	How should I describe you or your disability?

5. **In your casual conversations (not related to disability), do not use words that would offend a person with a disability.** This includes words like "retarded" or "lame" to describe something that is dumb, pathetic, or not cool.

Don't say	Do Say
That's lame.	That's not cool.

6. **Don't portray successful people with disabilities as superhumans or superheroes.** This raises false expectations that all people with disabilities should achieve this level of success. Furthermore, don't exalt someone with a disability out of pity or sympathy; do so because their actions merit praise.

It's important to remember that at times, we may all fail to speak with words that are respectful and encouraging to people with disabilities. Some of us grew up with words that were once appropriate descriptor words for those with disabilities but are no longer acceptable; others are surrounded by colloquialisms and cultural expressions that indirectly offend people with disabilities.

If you say something that is inappropriate to a person with a disability, apologize. Likewise, if you are the person with a disability and feel offense at a person's expression, kindly explain why those words are hurtful and offer an alternative, respectful expression for him/her to use. If there is a word that you frequently use and now realize it is inappropriate, remove it from your vocabulary. When we make the effort to use our words wisely, we are telling people with disabilities and their caregivers that we wish to respect them.

The Lifespan Institute at the University of Kansas has created a set of clear guidelines to help you make better choices in terms of language and portrayal. The *Guidelines* explain preferred terminology and offer suggestions for appropriate ways to describe people with disabilities.



Photo: Huffington Post

For a copy, visit: <http://rtcil.org/guidelines.shtml>.

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