

# It's the 'Person First' Then the Disability

## What do you see first?

- *The wheelchair?*
- *The physical problem?*
- *The person?*



If you saw a person in a wheelchair unable to get up the stairs into a building, would you say “There is a handicapped person unable to find a ramp?” Or would you say “There is a person with a disability who is handicapped by an inaccessible building?”

What is the proper way to speak to or about someone who has a disability?

Consider how you would introduce someone—Jane Doe—who doesn't have a disability. You would give her name, where she lives, what she does or what she is interested in: she likes swimming, or eating Mexican food, or watching movies.

Why say it differently for a person with a disability? Every person is made up of many characteristics—mental as well as physical. Few people want to be identified only by their ability to play tennis or by their love for fried onions.

In speaking or writing, remember that children or adults with disabilities are like everyone else—except they happen to have a disability. Therefore, here are a few tips for improving your language related to people with disabilities.

1. Speak of the person first, then the disability.
2. Emphasize abilities, not limitations.
3. Do not label people as part of a disability group. Don't say “the disabled;” say “people with disabilities.”
4. Don't give excessive praise or attention to a person with a disability; don't patronize them.
5. Choice and independence are important. Let the person do or speak for him or herself as much as possible.
6. A *disability* is a functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability to walk, hear, talk, learn, etc. Use *handicap* to describe a situation or barrier imposed by society, the environment, or oneself.

| Say:  | Instead of:                              |
|---|--|
| child with a disability                                       | disabled or handicapped child            |
| person with cerebral palsy                                    | C.P., or spastic                         |
| person who is deaf or hard of hearing                         | deaf and dumb                            |
| person with a cognitive or intellectual disability            | mentally retarded; retard                |
| person with epilepsy or person with seizure disorder          | epileptic                                |
| person who has...   | afflicted, suffers, from, victim         |
| without speech, nonverbal                                     | mute, or dumb                            |
| developmental delay   | slow                                     |
| emotional disorder, or mental illness                         | crazy, insane, or mentally ill           |
| uses a wheelchair   | confined to a wheelchair                 |
| with Down syndrome  | mongoloid; retard                        |
| has a learning disability                                     | is learning disabled                     |
| nondisabled   | normal, healthy                          |
| has a physical disability                                     | crippled                                 |
| congenital disability   | birth defect                             |
| condition   | disease ( <i>unless it's a disease</i> ) |
| seizures  | fits or spells                           |
| cleft lip   | hare lip                                 |
| mobility impaired   | lame                                     |
| medically involved, or has chronic illness                    | sickly                                   |
| paralyzed   | invalid or paralytic                     |
| has hemiplegia ( <i>paralysis of one side of the body</i> )   | hemiplegic                               |
| has quadriplegia ( <i>paralysis of both arms and legs</i> )   | quadriplegic                             |
| has paraplegia ( <i>loss of function in lower body only</i> ) | paraplegic                               |
| of short stature  | dwarf or midget                          |
| accessible parking  | handicapped parking                      |



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