

A Few Words About **PEOPLE FIRST LANGUAGE** by Kathie Snow

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People with disabilities constitute our nation's largest minority group. It's also the most inclusive and most diverse: both genders, any sexual orientation, and all ages, religions, socioeconomic levels, and ethnicities are represented. Yet the only thing people with disabilities have in common is being on the receiving end of societal misunderstanding, prejudice, and discrimination.

The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.

Mark Twain

And this largest minority group is the only one which *anyone 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?

Words matter! Old and inaccurate descriptors perpetuate negative stereotypes and reinforce an incredibly powerful attitudinal barrier, which is the *greatest obstacle facing individuals with disabilities*. A disability is, first and foremost, *a medical diagnosis*, and when we define people by their diagnoses, we devalue and disrespect them as individuals. Do *you* want to be known primarily by your psoriasis, gynecological history, or the warts on your behind? Using medical diagnoses incorrectly—as a measure of a person's abilities or potential—*can ruin people's lives*.

Embrace a new paradigm: "Disability is a natural part of the human experience..." (*U.S. Developmental Disabilities/Bill of Rights Act*). Yes, *disability is natural*, and it can be *redefined* as a "body part that works differently." A person with spina bifida has legs that work differently, a person with Down syndrome learns differently, and so forth. People can no more be *defined* by their medical

diagnoses than others can be defined by gender, ethnicity, religion, or other traits!

A diagnosis may also become a *sociopolitical passport* for services, entitlements, or legal protections. Thus, medical, educational, legal, or similar settings are the *only places* where the use of a diagnosis is relevant.

People First Language puts the person *before* the disability, and describes what a person *has*, not who a person *is*. Are you "cancerous" or do you have cancer? Is a person "handicapped/disabled" or does she "have a disability"? Using a diagnosis as a defining characteristic reflects prejudice, and also robs the person of the opportunity to define himself.

Let's reframe "problems" and into "needs." Instead of, "He has behavior problems," we can say, "He needs behavior supports." Instead of, "She has reading problems," we can say, "She needs large print." And let's eliminate the "special needs" descriptor—it generates pity and low expectations!

A person's self-image is tied to the words used about him. People First Language reflects good manners, not "political correctness," and it was started by individuals who said, "*We are not our disabilities!*" We can create a new paradigm of disability and change the world in the process. Using People First Language is right—*just do it, now!*

A FEW EXAMPLES OF PEOPLE FIRST LANGUAGE

Say:	Instead of:
Children/adults with disabilities.	Handicapped, disabled, special needs.
He has a cognitive disability.	He's mentally retarded.
She has autism.	She's autistic.
He has Down syndrome.	He's Down's/mongoloid.
She has a learning disability.	She's learning disabled.
He has a physical disability.	He's a quadriplegic/crippled.
She uses a wheelchair.	She's confined to/wheelchair bound.
He receives special ed services.	He's in special ed; a special ed kid.
People without disabilities.	Normal or healthy people.
Communicates with her eyes/device/etc.	Is non-verbal.
Congenital disability/Brain injury	Birth defect/Brain damaged
Accessible parking, hotel room, etc.	Handicapped parking, hotel room, etc.