

## 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: all ages, genders, religions, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic levels are represented.

Yet the only thing people with disabilities have in common is being on the receiving end of societal misunderstanding, prejudice, and discrimination. And this largest minority group is the only one that *anyone*

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

Mark Twain

*can join, at any time:* at birth, in the split second of an accident, through illness, or during the ag-

ing 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—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, the *only places* where the use of a diagnosis is relevant are medical, educational, legal, or similar settings.

**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" 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." "Low-functioning" or "high-functioning" are pejorative and harmful. Machines "function;" people live! 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.

# EXAMPLES OF PEOPLE FIRST LANGUAGE

BY KATHIE SNOW; VISIT [WWW.DISABILITYISNATURAL.COM](http://WWW.DISABILITYISNATURAL.COM) TO SEE THE COMPLETE ARTICLE

Remember: a disability descriptor is simply a medical diagnosis;  
People First Language respectfully puts the person before the disability;  
and a person with a disability is more *like* people without disabilities than different!

## SAY:

People with disabilities.  
He has a cognitive disability/diagnosis.  
She has autism (or a diagnosis of...).  
He has Down syndrome (or a diagnosis of...).  
She has a learning disability (diagnosis).  
He has a physical disability (diagnosis).  
She's of short stature/she's a little person.  
He has a mental health condition/diagnosis.  
She uses a wheelchair/mobility chair.  
He receives special ed services.  
She has a developmental delay.  
Children without disabilities.  
Communicates with her eyes/device/etc.  
Customer  
Congenital disability  
Brain injury  
Accessible parking, hotel room, etc.  
She needs... or she uses...

## INSTEAD OF:

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/is crippled.  
She's a dwarf/midget.  
He's emotionally disturbed/mentally ill.  
She's confined to/is wheelchair bound.  
He's in special ed.  
She's developmentally delayed.  
Normal or healthy kids.  
Is non-verbal.  
Client, consumer, recipient, etc.  
Birth defect  
Brain damaged  
Handicapped parking, hotel room, etc.  
She has problems with...has special needs.

***Keep thinking—there are many other descriptors we need to change!***

Excerpted from Kathie's People First Language article, available at [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com).

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