

# Using People-First Language

Educators have great influence to impact the actions, attitudes, and language of their students, colleagues, and families. Words are powerful and can foster positive images and abilities or perpetuate negative connotations. Being aware of and using People-First Language is a simple way to define a student's value and potential.

## People-First Language

People-First Language is defined as choosing words about people with disabilities that define the person first, not the disability. It is important to define who the person "is" before defining what disability the person "may have." Language is powerful and our words impact how others are viewed. For example, when we refer to "a student who receives special education services" in preference to "a special education student," we maximize the potential of the student while minimizing the impact of the disability.

## Presume Competence\*

As teachers, it is our responsibility to presume the competence of all students in our classrooms. Presuming competence means assuming all individuals:

- Are intellectually complex,
- Desire to have meaningful interactions and opportunities, and
- Have the right to learn rigorous academic content, despite communicating differently or having other support needs.

The belief that all students are competent to learn age-appropriate, general education curriculum content aligned to the grade-level standards in the general education classroom is inherent in the "presume competence" paradigm. This paradigm views students with disabilities through the lens of ability. Presuming competence for students with disabilities increases the expectations for academic and social achievement by including them in opportunities to learn what other students their age are learning.

When teachers "presume competence," it is synonymous with the concept of "least dangerous assumption." Anne Donnellan wrote that, "The criterion of least dangerous assumption holds that in the absence of conclusive data, educational decisions ought to be based on assumptions which, if incorrect, will have the least dangerous effect on the likelihood that students will be able to function independently as adults." She concluded that, "We should assume that poor performance is due to instructional inadequacy rather than to student deficits."

If we presume competence in all students, we ensure multiple opportunities for access, participation, and progress in grade level general education curriculum.

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*"Words differently arranged have a different meaning, and meanings differently arranged have a different effect."*

*Blaise Pascal*

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\* Adapted from Donnellan, A.M. (1984). The Criterion of the Least Dangerous Assumption. *Behavioral Disorders*, v9, n2 (pp.141-50).

# SAME AND DIFFERENT: RESPECT FOR ALL

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

Who are you? A son or daughter, brother or sister, soccer player or artist, doll collector or game player. You may also be

Use this outline of a head and draw yourself.



tall or short, have light or dark skin, or be the owner of big ears, freckles, or a small nose! Think about all the different things that make you the one-of-a-kind person you are. But are you *only* your hair color or body size or freckles or nose? And would you like someone to call you "Freckles" or "Skinny" or any other name like that? What would that make you feel like?

Now think about your friends or classmates. Are they just like you? Some might like the same TV shows as you, but their hair or eyes are different. So you're alike in some ways, but you're also different!

There are many ways we're all the same and all different, aren't there? Do you know other people who may have differences that are called "disabilities"? What is a disability, anyway? It's just a body part that works differently.

Maybe one of your grandparents wears a hearing aid or uses a mobility device, like a cane, walker, or wheelchair. Sometimes, we think we should feel sorry for people like this. But would you want anyone to feel sorry for you, because of your difference—like your big ears or small nose or hair color or body size? And isn't it wonderful that hearing aids, mobility devices, and other things are available? They allow people to do what they want to do. Think of all the things in *your* life that allow you to do what's important to you!

What is a disability?  
A body part that works differently!

Some people—like your grandparents or others—acquire a disability through an accident, illness, or becoming older. Others—like my son, Benjamin—are born with a disability, just like you were born with blue eyes or brown hair. And people with disabilities are more *like you* than different!

Benjamin uses a power wheelchair to get around and a laptop computer to do his schoolwork. When he was younger, he loved

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