



We Are People First

by Mary Durheim

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, people with disabilities have frequently been regarded as individuals to be pitied, feared or ignored. They have been portrayed as helpless victims, repulsive adversaries, heroic individuals overcoming tragedy, or charity cases who depended on others for their well being and care. Media coverage has frequently featured heartwarming and inspirational stories that, perhaps while well intended, unfortunately have too often resulted in reinforced stereotypes that patronize and underestimate the capabilities of individuals with disabilities. Why is this an important issue to CHADD? Plainly put: because we all are People First. We are NOT a disability or a disorder or handicapped. People with disabilities are, first and foremost, people—people who have individual abilities, interests and needs. Chances are, we are your friends, family, neighbors or co-workers.

In 1990, Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act. During this same period the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA) was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). New laws, disability activism and expanded coverage of disability issues converged, allowing us to alter public awareness and knowledge, while simultaneously reducing the most damaging stereotypes and misrepresentations. But while many strides have been made, we still have many miles to travel.

In today's society, "handicapped" and "disabled" are all-encompassing terms too frequently misused. When we misuse words, we reinforce the stigma and barriers created by negative and stereotypical attitudes. When we refer to people with disabilities by their medical diagnoses, we devalue and disrespect them as members of the human race. Disability labels are simply sociopolitical terms that provide a legal way to access necessary services.

For far too long, labels have been used to define

the value and potential of people who may have a disability. Disability can be defined as a body function that operates differently. Contrast that meaning with the origin of "handicap" from the dictionary which refers to "hand in cap"—a game where the losing player was considered to be at a disadvantage. The legendary origin of the word "handicap" refers to a person with a disability having to beg on the street corner with their "cap in hand." Using "handicapped" or even "disabled" creates a stereotypical perception that people with disabilities are all alike. Wouldn't it sound better to say "he is differently abled?"

We need to rid our vocabulary of the word "problem" when talking about people's differences. A disability is not a problem unless we see it as such. Problems lie not in the disability, but in the attitudes we hold about them.

When educators and society at large perceive children with disabilities as individuals who have the potential to learn, who have the need for the same

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People First Language

People First Language recognizes that individuals with disabilities are—first and foremost—people. It emphasizes each person's value, individuality, dignity and capabilities. The following examples provide guidance on what terms to use and which are inappropriate when talking or writing about people with disabilities.

People First Language to Use	Instead of Labels that Stereotype & Devalue
People/individuals with disabilities; an adult who has a disability; a child with a disability; a person	The handicapped; the disabled
People/individuals without disabilities; typical kids	Normal people/healthy individuals
People with mental retardation; he/she has a cognitive impairment; a person who has Down's syndrome	The mentally retarded; retarded people; he/she is retarded; the retarded; he/she's a Downs kid; a Mongoloid
A person who has autism	The autistic
People with a mental illness; a person who has an emotional disability; with a psychiatric illness/disability	The mentally ill; the emotionally disturbed; is insane; crazy; demented; psycho; a maniac; lunatic
A person who has a learning disability	He/she is learning disabled
A person who is deaf; he/she has a hearing impairment/loss; A man/woman who is hard of hearing	The deaf
A person who is deaf and cannot speak; who has a speech disorder; uses a communication device; uses synthetic speech	Is deaf and dumb; mute
A person who is blind; a person who has a visual impairment; man/woman who has low vision	The blind
A person who has epilepsy; person with a seizure disorder	An epileptic; a victim of epilepsy
A person who uses a wheelchair; people who have a mobility impairment; a person who walks with crutches	A person is wheelchair bound; a person who is confined to a wheelchair; a cripple
A person who has quadriplegia; people with paraplegia	A quadriplegic; the paraplegic
He/she is of small or short stature	A dwarf; a midget
He/she has a congenital disability	He/she has a birth defect
Accessible buses, bathrooms, etc.; reserved parking for people with disabilities	Handicapped buses, bathrooms, hotel rooms, etc.; handicapped parking

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education as their brothers and sisters and who have a future in the adult world of work, we don't have to fight for inclusive education.

When employers believe adults with disabilities have valuable job skills and can contribute to the success of a business, we don't have to fight for real jobs for real pay in the real community.

When business owners view people with disabilities as consumers with money to spend, we don't have to fight for accessible entrances and other reasonable accommodations.

Children with disabilities are children FIRST. The only labels they need are their names! Parents must not talk about their children in the clinical terms used by medical practitioners.

Adults with disabilities are adults FIRST. The only labels they need are their names! They must not talk about themselves the way service providers talk about them. Disability labels cannot be used to define human beings.

People tend to live up (or down) to our expectations. If we expect people with disabilities to succeed, we cannot let labels stand in the way. We must not let labels destroy the hopes and dreams of people with disabilities and their families. A person's self-image is strongly tied to the words used to describe that individual. If people with disabilities are to be included in all parts of our communities—in the ordinary, wonderful and typical activities most people take for granted—they must talk about themselves in the ordinary, wonderful typical language others use about themselves. We all must recognize that people with disabilities are real people with unlimited potential, just like all human beings. It is time to stop believing the myths of labels.

We have the power to create new truths about people with disabilities. We can influence society's views and treatment of people with disabilities. We must all remember that we are all only an accident or an illness away from having a disability. How would you want to be treated or regarded? Isn't it time for us to make this change? If not now—when? If not you—who?

Mary Durheim is an educational consultant and CHADD's president. Information for this article was obtained from the Texas DD Council and Disability is Natural.



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