A Quick Guide to Disability Language

When describing disabilities, many people use either People-First Language or Identity-First Language. This guide offers information and tips on using language that promotes dignity and respect for everyone.

What is People-First Language?

People-First Language puts the person first and the disability second to counter generalizations, assumptions, and stereotypes. For instance, "people with disabilities" instead of "the disabled," or "person with an intellectual disability" instead of "intellectually disabled person."

What is Identity-First Language?

Identity-First Language embraces a person's disability as an identity and puts the identifying word first. For instance, "disabled person" instead of "person with a disability," or "autistic person" instead of "person with autism."

How do I know which one to use?

Since everyone has their own preference, you can ask a person if they use People-First Language or Identity-First Language. You can also listen to how they refer to themselves, and then use the same language. Some people may not want you to mention their disability at all. When in doubt, ask.

Are there words I shouldn't use?

While keeping in mind individual preference, certain words that are widely considered demeaning or offensive shouldn't be used. This includes words such as retard and mentally retarded. Also, avoid language that describes non-disabled people as normal or whole when compared to people with disabilities.