

Tip Sheets

Disability Perceptions and Language

Disability can mean many different things. It is a socially constructed term that refers to a group of very diverse individuals who may be entitled to services or legal protections due to characteristics related most often to a medical diagnosis.

Perception of Disability

The perception of disability affects the well-being of people with disabilities, as well as society. A healthy society encourages positive attitudes toward people with disabilities and promotes their social inclusion.¹

Stereotypes

Stereotypes are beliefs about a group of people.

- They limit perceptions of what an individual within a given group can do.
- They often result in people being treated differently from others.
- They deny individual differences, abilities, and personalities.
- They say, "We do not like or value you."

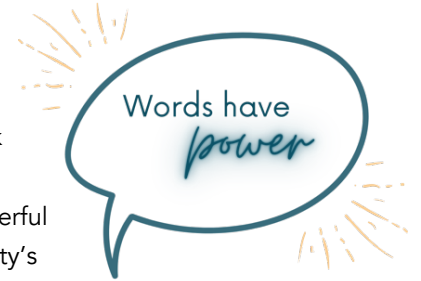
Development of Stereotypes

Stereotypes are passed on from adults to children and from child to child. Often, stereotypes are learned when we are young. The perpetuation of stereotypes occurs when no one steps forward and dispels a myth with facts.

We also learn stereotypes through media such as television and movies. Cultural and religious beliefs about disability may also produce stereotypes. Negative stereotypes are usually based on fear of the unknown, a lack of information, misinformation, or a lack of experience.

Disability Language

The language used to talk about people with disabilities has had a powerful influence in shaping society's perceptions and attitudes.



Language often communicates deficit and inferiority when most often people with disabilities do not see their disability as a loss or absence of something.

Person-First Language

Person-first language puts the person before their disability and can prevent labeling people with "negative" traits.

The goal of person-first language is to avoid language that dehumanizes and stigmatizes people. It also respects the individual differences among people with disabilities and acknowledges that people are not defined by their disability.

Examples of Person-First Language

- People with disabilities
(instead of the disabled)
- Person with a congenital disability
(instead of person with a birth defect)
- Person with a learning disability
(instead of learning disabled)

Identity-First Language

Identity-first language identifies what people with a disability consider to be a fundamental part of their who they are. It can also be empowering and a way of showing solidarity with a group of people who have the same/similar disabilities.

www.inclusivechildcare.org

¹ (Babik & Gardner, *Factors affecting the perception of disability: A developmental perspective* 2021)

Communities that often prefer identity-first language, such as the autism community, tend to be those centered on different ways of perceiving or interacting with the world. These communities have often developed a culture and sense of pride around their disability identity and don't view it as an impairment.

Examples of Identity-First Language

- Disabled person
(instead of person with a disability)
- Autistic person or individual
(instead of person with autism)
- Hard of hearing or Deaf with a capital "D"
(instead of person with deafness)



Always Ask!

Ultimately, the language we use is about showing dignity and respect. Everyone has their own preference in how they talk about their disability.

Respect the right to self-identify by:

- Listening to how a person refers to themselves and follow their lead.
- Asking a person if they use person-first or identity-first language.

If you are unsure about how to refer to someone, ask! Some people may not want you to mention their disability at all. Using the person's preference ensures that *they* choose how they're referred to.

Are there words I shouldn't use?

Always be considerate when referring to people with disabilities and keep in mind personal preferences. Don't use terms that disrespect or devalue.

Be aware of outdated language. Although some words may have been used in the past, certain words widely considered demeaning, offensive, limiting, and alienating that should not be used. This includes (but is not limited to):

- Retard/mentally retarded
- Handicap/handicapped
- Differently-abled
- Cripple/crippled
- Limited/abnormal/afflicted
- Unfortunate

Also avoid words/phrases that describe non-disabled people as normal or whole when compared to people with disabilities.

The Educator Role

Children learn by observing adults and other children. The words we use, the way we treat others, the books we read, and the media children consume send the message whether all people have the same value. It is critical for care providers to think about how we talk to and act toward all children.

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

Copyright © 2024 Center for Inclusive Child Care

These materials may be freely reproduced for educational purposes. Information in this tip sheet has been modified from multiple sources.

Funding provided by the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families.