



**STUDENT SUPPORT & TRANSITION SERVICES**  
**DEPARTMENT WITHIN STUDENT AFFAIRS**  
**DISABILITY RESOURCES AND SERVICES**

**People First Language**

By Kathie Snow

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

*Mark Twain*

**Who are “the handicapped” or the  
“disabled?”**

According to stereotypical myths, they are:  
People who *suffer* from the *tragedy* of *birth defects*. *Paraplegic heroes* who *struggle* to become *normal* again. *Victims* who *fight* to overcome their *challenges*. Categorically, they are called *retarded*, *autistic*, *blind*, *deaf*, *learning disabled*, etc., etc., etc., - ad naseum!

**Who are they, really?**

Moms & Dads . . . Sons & daughters  
Employees & Employers . . . Friends &  
Neighbors . . . Students & Teachers . . . Leaders  
& Followers

Scientists (Stephen Hawking)

Movie Stars (Marlee Matlin)

They are people.

**They are people, first.**

People with disabilities constitute our nation's largest minority group, which is simultaneously the most inclusive and the most diverse! Everyone's represented: people of both genders and of all ages, as well as individuals from all religions, ethnic backgrounds, and socioeconomic levels. Yet the only thing people with disabilities truly have in common with one another is dealing with societal misunderstanding, prejudice, and discrimination. Furthermore, the “disability community” is the only minority group which any one can join, at any time. Some join at birth. Others join in the split second of an accident, through illness, or by the aging process. If and when it happens to you,

will you have more in common with others who have disabilities or with family, friends, and co-workers? And how will you want to be described? How will you want to be treated? Disability issues affect all Americans!

**Inaccurate Descriptors**

“The handicapped” is an archaic term—it's no longer used in any federal legislation—that evokes negative images (pity, fear, and more). The origin of the word is from an “Old English” bartering game, in which the loser was left with his “hand in his cap,” and he was thought to be at a disadvantage. A legendary origin refers to a person with a disability begging with his “cap in his hand.” This antiquated, pejorative term perpetuates the stereotypical perception that people with disabilities are homogenous group of pitiful, needy people.

**The Power of Language & Labels**

Words are powerful. Old, inaccurate, and inappropriate descriptors perpetuate negative stereotypes and attitudinal barriers. When we describe people by their labels or medical diagnoses, we devalue and disrespect them as individuals. What is the purpose of a disability label? It's a sociopolitical passport for services! But we mistakenly use labels to determine how/where people with disabilities will be educated, what type of job they will/won't have, where/how they'll live and more. Worse, labels are frequently used to define a person's potential and value! In the process, we crush people's hopes and dreams and relegate them to the margins of society.

## Using People First Language is Crucial!

**People first language puts the person before the disability, and it describes what a person has, not what a person is.**

Are you “myopic” or do you wear glasses? Are you “cancerous” or do you have cancer? Are you “freckled” or do you have freckles? Is a person “handicapped” or “disabled” or does she have a disability?

If people with disabilities are to be included in all aspects of our communities – in the ordinary, wonderful, and typical activities most people take for granted – we must use the ordinary, wonderful, typical language used about people who don’t have disabilities.

A person’s self-image is strongly tied to the words used to describe him. For generations, people with disabilities have been described in negative, stereotypical language which has created harmful, mythical portrayals. We must believe children and adults with disabilities are unique individuals with unlimited potential to achieve their dreams, just like all Americans.

### Examples of People First Language

**Say:**

People with disabilities  
He has a cognitive disability.  
She has autism.  
He has Down Syndrome.  
She has a learning disability.  
He has a physical disability.  
She’s of short stature/she’s a little person.  
He has an emotional/mental health disability.  
She uses a wheelchair/mobility chair.  
He receives special ed services.  
Typical kids or kids without disabilities.  
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  
She’s learning disabled.  
He’s a quadriplegic/crippled.  
She’s a dwarf/midget.  
He’s emotionally disturbed.  
She’s wheelchair bound/confined  
He’s in special ed.  
Normal or healthy kids.  
Birth defect.  
Brain damaged.  
handicapped Parking, hotel room, etc.  
She has a problem with . . .



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