



Person-First Language for Individuals with Disabilities

What is the proper way to speak to or about someone who has a disability? The answer is to speak in the same way you would anyone else. In speaking or writing, remember that children or adults with disabilities are like everyone else; they also happen to have a disability. When referring to an individual with a disability, **always begin with** “a child, student, adult, youth, person, or individual.”

Say:	Instead of:
with a disability	is disabled; is handicapped
with a cognitive disability, an intellectual disability, or a developmental delay	is mentally retarded, delayed, slow, stupid
with an emotional or behavioral disorder; with mental health issues or mental illness	is mentally ill, crazy, nuts, poorly behaved
who has Cerebral Palsy	is CP, suffers from CP
who lives with Down syndrome	is downs, is mongoloid
who is deaf or hard of hearing	is deaf
with epilepsy or with a seizure disorder	is an epileptic
who is nonverbal	is dumb, is mute
with a learning disability	is learning disabled
with a physical disability	is crippled, lame, deformed
with mobility impairments, who uses a wheelchair or walker (or other device)	is wheelchair bound, is confined to a wheelchair
who is paralyzed	a quadriplegic, a quad, a paraplegic
with medical involvement or with a chronic illness	is afflicted with ____, suffers from ____, is a victim of ____
who is a little person	is a dwarf, is a midget

Here are a few tips for using respectful language related to individuals with disabilities.

1. Speak or write the person first, then the disability. This is called “person-first” language. For example, “Sam is a person with a disability,” or “Students with autism [...]”
2. Emphasize abilities, not limitations (i.e., Sam likes swimming and movies).
3. When communicating about a group, use the term “individuals with disabilities.”
4. Allow and expect that individuals with disabilities will speak for themselves.
5. Be careful not to idealize people who have disabilities as being brave simply because they have a disability. Notice their accomplishments and who they are without relating it to the disability.

