

February: Theme is “Words Matter”

EDUCATION: Person First Language

(Suggested audience: Elementary, middle and high school students)

Language is important

Have you ever heard the expression “sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me”? While words may not cause physical harm, they can, and often do, cause emotional pain. As one young girl described it, after she was called a name, “It made my heart hurt.”

Name calling, gossip, and making fun of someone when done with the intent to hurt, harm, or humiliate someone else can be considered bullying.

Recognize the person first, then the disability or difference

Sometimes, we use words that we don’t even realize have a negative impact on another individual or group. Many times these words are related to someone having a disability.

When someone seems different from you, it’s pretty easy to focus on what sets them apart. Maybe it’s how they look or speak.

But think about it:

- Suppose you were the only one who failed a math test.
- Would you want to be called “the math failure”?
- Wouldn’t it be more accurate to say you were “the person who failed the math test yesterday”?
- The test doesn’t define who you are; it’s one small thing about you.

Every person is made up of many characteristics and abilities—but few people want to be identified only by those things. That’s true whether it’s their grade on a math test, their ability to play tennis, or their love for fried onions. **Everyone is a person first.** It’s like that with disabilities, too.

When referring to an individual with a disability, speak first of the person, THEN the disability. An example would be to say “a student with a disability” versus calling them “a disabled student.”

Learn ideas on how to “put the person first.”

- Read the “[Language is Important](#)” handout
- Visit the [Teens Against Bullying](#) website

INTERACTION: The impact of language

Idea one: A wrinkled heart activity

(Suggested audience: Elementary school students)

Designed for younger students, “[A Wrinkled Heart](#)” provides students with a powerful visual that shows the effects

hurtful words or behaviors have on someone. The activity is simple and a great reminder to be kind to others.

Visit the [online toolkit](#).

Idea two: The KINDNESS poem

(Suggested audience: Elementary school students)

The “[Kindness Poem](#)” is an activity in which students can write a word or line of poetry that starts with each letter in the word KINDNESS. It can be about helping others, making a difference, or being a good classmate. Kindness is something that everyone can share—and it makes a difference!

Download the [template](#).

Idea three: The Short Bus Stops at My House

(Suggested audience: Middle and high school students)

Read the student essay titled “[The Short Bus Stops at My House](#).”

This essay, written by Laura as an 18-year-old for her 17-year-old brother David, illustrates the powerful bond of siblings. It illuminates the power and importance of language, and how what we say and hear shapes our perceptions.

Laura writes:

It’s funny how the length of the bus you ride has the ability to define you as a person. Personally, I rode the regular-sized bus, the one the “normal” students rode to school. However, there was another bus that happened to stop at my house every weekday morning. The ...short bus, “the retard racer,” the bus that was transportation for my brother. Yes, my brother rode the short bus and will forever be the root of some kid’s immature joke. Or even worse, the root of some adult’s joke. My brother is defined by his transportation of getting to school.

(Read the entire [essay](#).)

After reading the essay, consider the following classroom discussion questions:

- Why do people use condescending words about disabilities, such as “retarded,” to negatively reference a person or situation?
- What can be done to educate that it’s not acceptable to use words that disparage people with disabilities?
- Do you think that education about the impact bullying has on students with disabilities would change anything?
- What would be helpful for parents and educators to know about how students with disabilities are treated at school and in the community?

Special thank you to Laura Hertzog for sharing her essay.



David and Laura