

Person-First Language

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—except they happen to have a disability. When referring to an individual with a disability, **always begin with a “child, student, adult, youth, person, or individual.”**

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Say	Instead of
with a disability	is disabled or handicapped
with cerebral palsy	is CP or spastic
who is deaf or hard of hearing	is deaf
with a cognitive or intellectual disability	is a mentally retarded person
with epilepsy or with a seizure disorder	has spells
with a disability	is afflicted, suffers from, is a victim of
who is nonverbal	is mute
with a developmental delay	is slow
with an emotional or behavioral disorder, or mental illness	is a mentally ill person
who uses a wheelchair	is confined to a wheelchair
with Down syndrome	is a mongoloid
with a learning disability	is learning disabled
with a physical disability	is crippled
with a cleft lip	has a harelip
with mobility impairments	is lame
with medical involvement, or with a chronic illness	is sickly
paralyzed	is an invalid
little person	is a dwarf or 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 a person with a disability will speak for him or herself.

Say “a child, an individual, a young adult, an adult, a student, or a person” with a disability.