

People First Language

People with disabilities have for many years stood up for more dignified and respectful language and we have much to learn from them, namely what they call *people first language*. One of the best articles I've ever found succinctly explained it all. It was written by Kathie Snow a mother of a son with many characteristics she explains only one of which is cerebral palsy. Her article is so helpful I'm offering here a bit of a "book review" of it. It is titled *To ensure Inclusion, Freedom and Respect for all, we must use People First Language* and can be found with a whole host of other helpful materials at her website www.disabilityisnatural.com.

Snow points out that we typically label the "handicapped" or "disabled" with these descriptor terms and proceed to further describe them with more disrespectful descriptions using stereotypical perceptions such as:

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 nauseum*.

She then points out *who they really are*:

Moms and Dads – Sons and Daughters – Employees and Employers – Friends and Neighbors – Students and Teachers – Leaders and Followers – Scientists, Doctors, Actors, Presidents, and More. They are people. *They are people, first.*

Snow has learned what she too calls *The Power of Language and Labels* and states,

Words are powerful. Old and inaccurate descriptors, and the inappropriate *use* of these descriptors, perpetuate negative stereotypes and reinforce an incredibly powerful attitudinal barrier. And this invisible, but potent, attitudinal barrier is the greatest obstacle facing individuals who have disability diagnoses. When we describe people by their medical diagnoses, we devalue and disrespect them as individuals. Do you want to be known primarily by your psoriasis, gynecological history, the warts on your behind, or any other condition?

Worse, medical diagnoses 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.

Snow calls the term "handicapped" archaic and reports it can no longer be found in any federal regulation. She explains its origin is from an Old English bartering game in which the loser was left with his "hand in his cap" or in other words, at a disadvantage. Another origin refers to one with a disability begging with his "cap in his hand." Snow says this "antiquated, derogatory term perpetuates the stereotypical perception that people with disability diagnoses make up one homogenous group of pitiful, needy people!" She wisely points out that other people who share some characteristic are not all alike nor are people with disability. She teaches that people labeled "disabled"- which implies broken down like a disabled car – are not broken.



Wow, Snow says it all when she brings into the discussion attitude:

A change in attitude can change everything. If educators believed children with disability diagnoses are boys and girls who have the potential to learn, who need the same quality of education as their brothers and sisters, and who have a future in the adult world of work, we wouldn't have millions of children being segregated and undereducated in special ed rooms.

If employers believed adults with disability diagnoses have (or could learn) valuable job skills, we wouldn't have an estimated 75% unemployment rate of people with disabilities! If merchants saw people with disabilities as customers with money to spend, we wouldn't have so many inaccessible stores, theaters, restrooms and more. If the service system saw people with disabilities as "customers," instead of "clients," "consumers," or "recipients," perhaps it would focus on meeting a person's real needs (like inclusion, friendship, etc.) instead of trying to remediate a person's "problems."

And if individuals with disabilities and family members saw themselves as first-class citizens who can and should be fully included in all areas of life, we might also focus on what's really important (living a Real Life), instead of a Special Life governed by services that often result in social isolation and physical segregation.

Snow is our friend in this deep delve into language as she also notes that the environment plays a part. She purports that whether one has a disability is often a consequence of the environment and asks, "When a person is in a welcoming, accessible environment with the appropriate supports, accommodations, and tools, does he still have a disability? I think not."

People First Language puts the person before the disability, and it describes what a person *has*, not who 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/disabled" or does she have a disability?

Children with disability diagnoses are children, first. The only label they need are their names! Parents must not talk about their children in the clinical terms used by professionals. The parent of a child who wears glasses (diagnosis: myopia) doesn't say, "My daughter is myopic," so why does the parent of a child who has the diagnosis of autism say, "My daughter is autistic?"

Adults with disability diagnoses are adults, first. The only label they need are their names! They must not talk about themselves the way professionals talk about them. An adult with a medical diagnosis of cancer doesn't say, "I'm cancerous," so why does an adult with a diagnosis of cerebral palsy say, "I'm disabled."?

A person's self image is strongly tied to the words used to describe him. For generations, people with disabilities have been described by negative, stereotypical words which have created harmful, mythical portrayals. We must stop believing (and perpetuating) the myths – *the lies* – of labels. We must believe children and adults who have been diagnosed with conditions we call



disabilities are unique individuals with unlimited potential to achieve their dreams, just like all Americans.

People First Language isn't about being "politically correct." It is, instead, about good manners and respect (and it was begun by individuals who said, "We are not our disabilities!") We have the power to create a new paradigm of disability. In doing so, we'll change lives of children and adults who have disability diagnoses – and we'll also change ourselves and our world!

Words have so much power, don't they? Didn't we all find out young that another lie is "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me?" Wrongo. Tune in for more on the power of language in future articles and 'til then, let's all use *people first language*.

Submitted by Carmen Bowman 12-27-10 and printed in the Carbon Valley News 1/11

