

NYLN

National Youth Leadership Network



Kids As Self Advocates

Respectful Disability Language: Here's What's Up!

“The difference between the right word and the almost-right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.”

— Mark Twain

What does “Respectful Disability Language” Mean?

The Disability Rights Movement advocates for positive changes in society. These changes include equal rights under the law and equal access to housing and employment. It could also mean improving how people with disabilities are talked about in places like the media or in everyday conversations. The use of language and words describing people with disabilities has changed over time. It's important that people are aware of the meaning behind the words they use when talking to, referring to, or working with the Disability Community. Disrespectful language can make people feel excluded and can be a barrier to full participation. This is a guide to using respectful words and language.

When does Language = Power?

Imagine living your whole life always having to explain why the words that people use are hurtful and offensive to you. Teachers, co-workers, friends, and family need to know how the words and phrases they use make you feel. Many of us are brought up in homes in which we are the only one with a disability. Maybe we haven't learned to think of ourselves or other people with disabilities as proud individuals. People with disabilities want respect and acceptance.

Many people who do not have a disability now will have one in the future. Others will have a family member or a friend who will become disabled. If you become disabled in your lifetime, how do you want people to describe you? If a family member or friend becomes disabled, how would you want him/her to be treated? Disability affects all people. So learn respectful language and teach others.

General Guidelines for Talking about Disability

- Refer to a person's disability only when it is related to what you are talking about. For example, don't ask "What's wrong with you?" Don't refer to people in general or generic terms such as "the girl in the wheelchair."
- When talking about places with accommodations for people with disabilities, use the term "accessible" rather than "disabled" or "handicapped." For example, refer to an "accessible" parking space rather than a "disabled" or "handicapped" parking space or "an accessible bathroom stall" rather than "a handicapped bathroom stall."
- Use the term "disability," and take the following terms out of your vocabulary when talking about or talking to people with disabilities. Don't use the terms "handicapped," "differently-abled," "cripple," "crippled," "victim," "retarded," "stricken," "poor," "unfortunate," or "special needs."
- Just because someone has a disability, it doesn't mean he/she is "courageous," "brave," "special," or "superhuman." People with disabilities are the same as everyone else. It is not unusual for someone with a disability to have talents, skills, and abilities.
- It is okay to use words or phrases such as "disabled," "disability," or "people with disabilities" when talking about disability issues. Ask the people you are with which term they prefer if they have a disability.
- When talking about people without disabilities, it is okay to say "people without disabilities." But do not refer to them as "normal" or "healthy." These terms can make people with disabilities feel as though there is something wrong with them and that they are "abnormal."
- When in doubt, call a person with a disability by his/her name.

Words to Describe Different Disabilities


Here are some ways that people with disabilities are described. This list includes “outdated language” – terms and phrases that should not be used. This list also includes respectful words that should be used to describe different disabilities. What is “okay” for some people is not “okay” for others. If you don’t know what to say, just ask how a person likes to be described.

<u>Disability</u>	<u>Out-Dated Language</u>	<u>Respectful Language</u>
Blind or Visually Impairment	Dumb, Invalid	Blind/Visually Impaired, Person who is blind/visually impaired
Deaf or Hearing Impairment	Invalid, Deaf-and-Dumb, Deaf-Mute	Deaf or Hard-of-hearing, Person who is deaf or hard of hearing
Speech/Communication Disability	Dumb, “One who talks bad”	Person with a speech / communication disability
Learning Disability	Retarded, Slow, Brain-Damaged, “Special ed”	Learning disability, Cognitive disability, Person with a learning or cognitive disability
Mental Health Disability	Hyper-sensitive, Psycho, Crazy, Insane, Wacko, Nuts	Person with a psychiatric disability, Person with a mental health disability
Mobility/Physical Disability	Handicapped, Physically Challenged, “Special,” Deformed, Cripple, Gimp, Spastic, Spaz, Wheelchair-bound, Lame	Wheelchair user, Physically disabled, Person with a mobility or physical disability
Emotional Disability	Emotionally disturbed	Emotionally disabled, Person with an emotional disability
Cognitive Disability	Retard, Mentally retarded, “Special ed”	Cognitively/Developmentally disabled, Person with a cognitive/developmental disability
Short Stature, Little Person	Dwarf, Midget	Someone of short stature, Little Person
Health Conditions	Victim, Someone “stricken with” a disability (i.e. “someone stricken with cancer” or “an AIDS victim”)	Survivor, Someone “living with” a specific disability (i.e. “someone living with cancer or AIDS”)

This document was co-written by
the National Youth Leadership Network (NYLN)
and Kids As Self Advocates (KASA).

NYLN

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The National Youth Leadership Network (NYLN) is a voice for young leaders with disabilities. We live across the United States and its territories. This is a place where young leaders come together to support (help) other youth with disabilities. We believe youth can do a lot! NYLN tries to help youth at national, state, and local levels. We link them to opportunities for education, employment, and independence. NYLN also talks about things important to youth with disabilities, such as policies (laws) affecting our lives.



Kids As Self Advocates

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KASA is a project of 

Kids As Self Advocates (KASA) is a project created by youth with disabilities for youth. Young people who work with KASA are from all over the United States. KASA knows youth can make choices and advocate for themselves if they have the information and support they need. KASA believes young people with disabilities will have control over their own lives and futures. We will help make this happen by teaching youth about their rights, giving peer support and training, and changing the systems that affect our lives to include us.

NYLN and KASA decided to co-write this document because:

- KASA works with youth ages 13-24 and NYLN with youth 16-28.
- Both groups reach out to national networks.
- Both KASA and NYLN work hard to be accessible to youth with disabilities. They wanted to share what they have learned “for youth with disabilities, by youth with disabilities.”