

# Using Words with Dignity:

## Terms and Guidelines to Accurately Portray People with Disabilities

Language is a powerful tool that shapes ideas, perceptions, and ultimately attitudes. Words mirror society's attitudes and perceptions towards people with disabilities. Attitudes can be the most difficult barrier people with disabilities face in achieving acceptance into society.

Language use is always changing as people with disabilities become more fully included. People with disabilities ask that respectful terms be used when writing and speaking about them or issues that may affect their lives.

### *Awareness of Terms*

- The term handicap is a social or environmental barrier that disadvantages an individual who has a disability (e.g., lack of access to a building because of stairs).
- The term disability is a universal human experience. Every human being will experience a decrease in their health and thereby a degree of disability at some point in their life (WHO, 2001).
- The terms handicap and retarded are unacceptable and disrespectful terms when writing and speaking about people with disabilities.

### *Terminology Guidelines*

- Use person-first terminology as he/she is a person first and their disability is only one part of who they are.
- If the disability is not relevant, it is not necessary to make reference to it.
- If you are unsure, ask the person what language he/she feels comfortable with.
- Be careful with words and phrases that set people with disabilities apart from others (e.g., we/they, special needs, healthy, normal, challenged).

### *Instead of*

Confined to a wheelchair  
The disabled  
Handicapped  
Cognitive impairment  
Birth defect  
The blind  
Autistic children  
Mentally retarded  
Crippled  
Midget

### *Try*

Wheelchair user  
People with disabilities  
Person with a disability  
Cognitive disability  
Person with a congenital disability  
People who are blind or have a visual disability  
Children with autism  
Developmental disability  
Person with a mobility disability  
Person of short stature or little person

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