

ADAPTIVE LANGUAGE

HOW TO REFERENCE INDIVIDUALS WITH IDD'S

Mark Twain said “The difference between the right word and an almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lighting bug.” Language matters, especially when it comes to respecting people and the way they want to be addressed and perceived. That’s why whether you are a media representative, an employer or just a friend, it’s important to learn best practices in addressing individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Differences.



Use People First Language

- People first language puts the person before the disability. It describes what a person has rather than who a person is. A disability is a medical diagnosis. It is not an identity. We are all people first. People first language eliminates generalizations, assumptions and stereotypes by focusing on the person rather than the difference.
- Don’t give in to the temptation of not rephrasing properly for the sake of brevity or to fit neatly in a byline or caption.
- Avoid victim-based words - such as “unfortunate” “afflicted” or “suffering” when referring to a person with an IDD.

Instead of this...	Say this...
Disabled person	Person who is differently abled
Wheelchair-bound person	Person who uses a wheelchair
He is nonverbal	He communicates nonverbally
Normal person	Typical person
Intellectually disabled person	A person with an IDD
Downs girl	She has Down syndrome.
Autistic	She has autism. She is on the autism spectrum.
A low functioning person	A person who needs extra support

Disabilities vs. Differences

We often must say “disabilities” to adhere to medical, government or legal frameworks, but we can say “differences” in other settings. The use of the word “differences” in place of “disabilities” is gaining momentum nationwide. In fact, Florida is one of the top states making this change in the vernacular. Here are some ways you can help continue this trend:

EXAMPLES

Instead of this...	Say this...
Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities	Intellectual and Developmental Differences
Disabilities	Differences, Unique Abilities, Differing Abilities
Disabled	Uniquely abled, Differently abled

- When referring to people with IDD's, begin incorporating intellectual and developmental differences into your everyday spoken vocabulary both personally and professionally.

Example: “My friend Albert has an intellectual and developmental difference that may make it more challenging for him to multi-task, but lends itself particularly well to organizational tasks like filing.”

- In printed materials, try using disabilities as a first reference and then integrating differences as much as possible.

Example: Growing evidence suggests that students with intellectual disabilities can perform certain tasks more effectively. Though these students are differently abled, they seem to have a unique perspective that helps them thoroughly and completely focus on the job at hand.

- Websites and search engine optimization require a slightly different tactic because there is a substantial difference between search interest for “disabilities” versus “differences” and we are at the mercy of search engines like Google. Because so many searches are still based on the word “disabilities,” whether you are a reporter or an organization that serves people with differences, you should consider strategies for incorporating “differences” without compromising website traffic. Incorporate “differences” in addition to disabilities or phrases like “disabilities or differences” to capture both terms on high-traffic pages. Stick with “differences” on low traffic pages.

**Words shape attitudes and perceptions. Attitudes and perceptions shape actions.
Begin affecting change by using best practices.**