

ADAPTIVE LANGUAGE HOW TO REFERENCE INDIVIDUALS WITH IDD'S

“Language is very powerful. Language does not just describe reality. Language creates the reality it describes” - Desmond Tutu. 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.



What is the Best Practice?

Most experts agree that people-first language is the best practice when addressing someone with an intellectual and developmental difference (IDD).

- People-first language puts the person before the difference. It describes what a person has, rather than who a person is. We are all people first.
- Begin a conversation with people-first language but follow someone’s lead if their preference differs.*
- Avoid victim-based words, such as “unfortunate,” “afflicted” or “suffering.”

Instead of This...	Say This...
Downs girl	A girl with Down syndrome
Wheelchair-bound person	Person who uses a wheelchair
Normal person	Typical person

When it comes to autism, people often have different preferences, such as “I have Autism.” “I am on the Autism Spectrum.” “I am an Autistic man.”

**For some individuals, a diagnosis is a source of community, advocacy, and identity. They prefer identity-first language. Identity-first language orders the disability first and person second, such as disabled person, autistic man, or deaf woman.*

Disabilities vs. Differences

Changing perceptions includes changing the dialogue. The use of the word “differences” in place of “disabilities” is gaining momentum nationwide, specifically when it comes to our friends with IDD's. We often must say “disabilities” to adhere to medical, government or legal frameworks, but we can say “differences” in other settings.

You can help continue this trend by choosing language that directs attention to the abilities of those uniquely gifted to make a difference in our lives and community.

EXAMPLES

Instead of This...	Say This...
Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities	Intellectual and Developmental Differences
Intellectual Disability	Differences, Unique Abilities, Differing Abilities, All Abilities
Intellectually Disabled	Differently able, Uniquely Able, Uniquely Gifted

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 difference that may make it more difficult for him to multi-task, but lends itself particularly well to organizational tasks like filing.*

In printed materials Begin with “disabilities” as a first reference and then integrate “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 unique perspective that helps them thoroughly and completely focus on the job at hand.*

Websites and search engine optimization require a different tactic because there is a substantial difference between search interest for “disabilities” versus “differences” and we are at the mercy of search engines. It's important for search engine optimization that you use a combination of differences and disabilities on your website.

***It is important to note:** Some people with physical and other disabilities might prefer the term disability, not differences. This contrasting position stems from the belief that avoiding the word “disability” suggests there is something inherently wrong with it. We certainly respect this view and understand that personal preferences on this issue are all subjective and varied. Our goal is to simply shift cultural expectations about IDD's by enriching the vocabulary. There is room for both perspectives.*

Differences are a welcome and dynamic part of our culture. We believe people of all abilities are a valued part of our communities.