**Words Matter**

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**Note:** This document is intended to share some current best practices in language to address disability. There are exceptions to every rule, and certain disability groups and individuals self-identify using other culturally-specific terminology. The following is aimed to support able-bodied people in how they use language on websites, in publications, communication and in address individuals.

Words Matter.

They make a difference.

Words are mirrors of society’s perceptions and attitudes. Some of the most difficult barriers people with disabilities face are other people’s attitudes. The words we use are powerful tools, shaping ideas and perceptions, and impacting how we describe and relate to people. Both positive and negative.

Language changes over the years. Disparaging and dated words have been replaced by precise terms that respect persons with disabilities.

It’s not uncommon for able-bodied people to feel uncertain about how to refer to persons with disabilities. They may be embarrassed or afraid to say the “wrong thing”, or simply may not know current acceptable terminology.

Here are some general guidelines:

Use person first language:

* Put the **person** *before* the disability. People are not conditions. Use terms like “people with disabilities” rather than “the disabled” (disabled is community language is a reclaiming of the word, it means something different to a community member)
* Examples:
  + Person with a developmental disability
  + Person with cerebral palsy

Use words that are non-judgmental, non-emotional and are accurate descriptions.

* Do not use trendy euphemisms. Expressions such as *physically challenged*, *differently abled*, *diverse-ability, handi-capable, and* *special* are regarded by some people with disabilities as patronizing, avoiding reality, and inaccurate. Keep to simple language, such as “people with disabilities”.
* Do not use *victim of,* *suffers from*, *afflicted,* or *confined to a wheelchair.* These terms diminish the person’s dignity and magnify the disability.
  + The expression “*confined to a wheelchair*” perpetuates the misconception that someone’s wheelchair is the most prominent and important aspect of that person, and denies the reality that wheelchairs are liberating devices.
* Avoid labeling people with disabilities as *courageous*, *superhuman*, *poor* or *unfortunate*.
* *Terms regarded as most offensive include handicapped, impaired, challenged*.

***IMPORTANT:*** The individual with the disability gets to choose how they identify; they can use any language covered in this document, as well as any other preferred term.

Do not correct a person living with a disability if they use language that you have been asked not to use. Simply continue to use the language tools in this document and remain respectful. It is the able-bodied community that needs to be respectful of language that is inappropriate and demeaning.

***REMEMBER:***

* + The word “disability” is not a bad or dirty word.
* NOTE: Some members of the Deaf community consider themselves members of a cultural and linguistic group who were born Deaf or became Deaf in childhood and share a common language (American Sign Language). These individuals do not always identify themselves as persons with a disability. More of a language barrier
* The community is very specific about their language: Deaf and Hard of Hearing (the Capital “D” signifies Deaf culture. A lover case “d” would be for folks who have acquired deafness though the aging process and do not use ASL)
* NOTE: Many people with Autism prefer to be referred to as “*Autistic people”.*

This is an example of “Identify first” language

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| Word to use and conventions |  | Words to avoid and why |
| Accessible washroom/parking | vs. | Impaired: visually impaired, mobility impaired, cognitively impaired, hearing impaired  Impaired mean “broken” |
| barriers | vs. | Challenged /challenges |
| Impacted  This word can replace almost any other and reduces assumptions and ableist bias | vs. | Affected, struggles, afflicted,  “Jake’s life is impacted by seizures”  instead of  “Jake’s suffers/afflicted from seizures” (this is an assumption, only Jake knows if he is suffering) |
| Ableist microaggression  “common daily language that has a systemic relationship to disability – likely a term that was once diagnostic” | vs. | Examples of ableist micro aggressions:  Crazy, insane, stupid, dumb, lame, moron  Folks that identify with mental illness or as MAD (a re-claiming community term) start to believe that they are broken, wrong and not part of society when society identifies them with these terms”)  Consider using “bonkers, bananas, ridicules, as replacement non harmful terms |
| Disability is not a bad word | vs. | Handicapped, retarded |
| Inspiration porn:  Saying that people with disabilities are inspiring for doing the daily tasks of life: making breakfast or getting dressed and going to work | vs. | Best to avoid using the term “inspiration” when referring to disability  Refrain from words like: poor, unfortunate, sad, devastating |
| Blind, partially sighted, partially blind, low vision, sight loss, vision loss | vs | Visually impaired |

Consultation with people who have lived experience and can share about Deaf culture and Autism culture should be sought out for specifics teachings on their communities and experiences. If you are looking for individuals who can provide additional information beyond basic respectful language, contact the resource below for places to find these individuals with specified information.

This document is an offer of best practices, not “rules” that need to be followed. But know that language is impactful and if you want to build respect, inclusion and a relationship with the disability community, language is a great place to start. This document is an entry point to a larger series of discussions and workshops that can be accessed by reaching out to Access in Practice and making an inquiry.

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Access in Practice,

Accessibility consultants with the lived experience necessary to change the world.

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