



Communicating With and About People With Disabilities

Using Person-First Language

Educators have great influence to impact the actions, attitudes, and language of their students, colleagues, and families. Words are powerful and can foster positive images and abilities or perpetuate negative connotations. Being aware of and using person-first language is a simple way to emphasize a student's value and potential.

Person-first language is defined as choosing words about people with disabilities that define the person first, not the disability. It is important to define who the person "is" before defining what disability the person "may have." Language is powerful, and our words impact how others are viewed. For example, when we refer to "a student who receives special education services" in preference to "a special education student," we maximize the potential of the student while minimizing the impact of the disability.

While person-first language is commonly used in federal and state policies, and is supported by a number of organizations (e.g., The Arc, AMA), of which the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) is one, there are also groups who support the use of identity-first language. Some self-advocacy groups assert the importance of using disability terminology as their primary identifier. They describe that establishing themselves as an autistic person or a deaf person, as examples, communicates who they see themselves to be. Their disability is not a disease or condition they suffer, but rather an essential part of what makes them unique and self-determined individuals. While person-first language emphasizes presuming competence and eliminating limits on expectations of students with disabilities, it is important to recognize that language is a powerful tool and brings with it the opportunity to reflect on how we use language to empower individuals with disabilities and embolden dignity in all people.

"Words differently arranged have a different meaning, and meanings differently arranged have a different effect."

Blaise Pascal

Presuming Competence*

As teachers, it is our responsibility to presume the competence of all students in our classrooms. Presuming competence means assuming all individuals:

- Are intellectually complex,
- Desire to have meaningful interactions and opportunities, and
- Have the right to learn rigorous academic content, despite communicating differently or having other support needs.

The belief that all students are competent to learn age-appropriate, general education curriculum content, aligned to the grade-level standards in the general education classroom is inherent in the “presume competence” paradigm. This paradigm views students with disabilities through the lens of ability. Presuming competence for students with disabilities increases the expectations for academic and social achievement by including them in opportunities to learn what other students their age are learning.

When teachers “presume competence,” it is synonymous with the concept of “least dangerous assumption.” Anne Donnellan wrote that, “The criterion of least dangerous assumption holds that in the absence of conclusive data, educational decisions ought to be based on assumptions which, if incorrect, will have the least dangerous effect on the likelihood that students will be able to function independently as adults.” She concluded that, “We should assume that

poor performance is due to instructional inadequacy rather than to student deficits.”

If we presume competence in all students, we ensure multiple opportunities for access, participation, and progress in grade level general education curriculum.

Choosing to use person-first language promotes presuming competence for all students. It is only important to refer to a student’s disability if it is relevant to the conversation or situation. This ensures that the emphasis is placed on the student, not the disability. Many labels used in our society have negative connotations and can be misleading. Using labels contributes to negative stereotypes and devalues the person one attempts to describe. Disability is just another label.

People who have disabilities are present in every aspect of society: moms and dads, sons and daughters, employees and employers, friends and neighbors, scientists and movie stars, leaders and followers, teachers and students . . . they are people. Most importantly, they are people first.

Using person-first language provides us with the opportunity to view all students through the lens of their abilities. Words really do matter. Below are phrases that promote person-first language, and phrases that we should avoid.

* Adapted from Donnellan, A.M. (1984). The Criterion of the Least Dangerous Assumption. *Behavioral Disorders*, v9,n2 (pp.141-50).

Person-First Language	Language to Avoid
Student who receives special education services	Special education student; an IEP student
Student who uses a wheelchair	Wheelchair-bound student
Student with an intellectual disability	Mentally retarded student or MR student
Student with a learning disability	Dyslexic; LD student
Student with a disability	Crippled, physically challenged, handicapped student
Student with cerebral palsy	Student who suffers from cerebral palsy

Modeling Person-First Language

- Refer to a person's disability only if it is relevant to the conversation.
- Use the term "disability" not "handicap" when referring to a person's disability.
- Use positive language when describing a person's disability to eliminate stereotypes. Words such as "suffers from, a victim of, or afflicted with" portray sympathy or pity toward people with disabilities.
- Use language such as a "person without a disability" if necessary to make comparisons. Words such as "normal, regular, or able-bodied" used to describe people without disabilities imply that people with disabilities are of lesser value.
- Define all people by the multiple characteristics they possess.
- Use the "person" word first (e.g., the girl who has, the boy with, the student who).
- Create a caring classroom community by modeling person-first language for students and by guiding students to use person-first language throughout all interactions.

Showing Respect for People With Disabilities

Disability etiquette is a term that is used to describe a heightened awareness of the impact our actions and words may have on people with and without a disability. Actions such as leaning on a student's wheelchair, talking too close or not at eye level, anticipating every need and providing support even when it is not warranted or requested, are behaviors that can be considered intrusive and uncomfortable for a student with a disability.

Instead, consider the following:

- Respect personal space.
- Use language that is consistent with the age of the student.
- Talk to the student at his or her eye level.
- Ask questions to determine whether the student needs assistance. This provides the student with opportunities for choice and independence.
- Monitor your volume and tone to match the situation and the student. Talking loudly or too slowly is unnecessary in most situations.
- Ask the student whether they prefer person-first or identity-first language.

Person-first language can be a practice that relates to all students. It puts the person first before any defining quality or quantification. It allows one to see the person first, and any defining characteristics second. People are made up of a variety of characteristics; one alone doesn't define us. We are not the "red-headed kid," the "soccer boy," or the "violin girl," but we are people who happen to have red hair, play soccer, or have mastered the violin.

Being defined as a label is stigmatizing, limiting, and damaging in how we are perceived by others. Using person-first language in our classrooms and school community with all students gives us the opportunity to value and celebrate the student first.

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Josh Shapiro

Governor

