Communicating with and about people with disabilities

The way you speak to and about people with disabilities matters.
This handout provides guidelines for using language that is accurate, neutral, and objective.

1. Always respect an individual's language preferences.

People have different preferences when referring to their disability. Some people prefer to use person-first language meaning you refer to the person first and the disability second. Some people prefer to use identity-first language meaning you refer to the disability first and the person second.

2. Remember that disabilities come in many different forms.

People with disabilities do not all look the same and may have different needs. Some disabilities may be hidden or not easy to see physically. Disabilities can include chronic conditions like arthritis or a mental health condition.

3. Focus on abilities, not limitations.

Choose language that focuses on what people can do instead of what they can't do. For example, say or write 'Person who uses a wheelchair,' not 'wheelchair-bound.'

4. Use language that focuses on accessibility rather than the presence of a disability.

'Handicapped' is an outdated term used when referring to individuals or environments. Instead, use 'accessible parking' and 'accessible restrooms.'

5. Avoid offensive language.

Words that seem harmless can be hurtful and insulting to people with disabilities. Do not use language that portrays the person as defective or suggests a lack of something. Instead, say 'person with an intellectual disability'. Avoid euphemisms like 'differently-abled' and 'handi-capable.'

The children and youth with special health care needs (CYSHCN) Systems Development Group works to improve care for CYSHCNs. We partner with community-based organizations across Texas to provide support for families of CYSHCN. For more information, visit: dshs.texas.gov/mch/cshcn.aspx

*Adapted from: adata.org/factsheet/adann-writing and cdc.gov/disability-and-health/about/index.html

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