



training & advocacy

Is It Really the Hat that Makes the Man? Using Sensitive “People-First” Language

By Donna C. Martinez

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In our world, there is an amazing variety of people with distinctive characteristics and descriptions. When we speak about someone, we commonly visualize who that person is and what makes that particular individual unique. Often what we notice first is a person's distinctive descriptor “hat.” That hat may describe their characteristics (tall, short, redheaded, bald), their behaviors (timid, obedient, adventurous, generous, kind), or their position and role in life (boss, employee, mom, child, husband or wife, The President, a movie star). Yet at the end of the day when all our hats of distinction are stored neatly away in their respective hatboxes, one common characteristic reflects back in our closet mirror: the human being each and every one of us is.

As we sketch an individual in our minds, we begin to form a meaningful picture of that person so others may recognize and come to a shared recognition of the person about whom we are speaking. The details we select reflect how we see that person in our lives and how we want others to know him. However, the person standing under that hat is what must be defined, not the hat on his head. This point is especially important when speaking of a person who also happens to have a disability. The image we create must be the person first, not their disability.

Understanding and speaking in terms of this simple concept—that we are all people first—has not been common until the last decade. The concepts of how people with disabilities are considered, as well as the social significance of having a disability, has evolved over the years. Society historically divided humanity into two groups: the disabled and the non-disabled. Arbitrarily, professionally, and legally controlled definitions and classification procedures designed the social image of people with disabilities. Through the efforts of a multitude of lawmakers, organizations, agencies, families, and self-advocates, people with disabilities are no longer viewed with pity, remorse or shame. Segregation is no longer the final chapter of their life. In short, people with disabilities are not defined by those disabilities.

Attitudes and social values that previously defined people with disabilities by their limitations are now redefining them

as valued, capable members of their communities. Society is on the fast track of weaving these social values in the fabric of our daily life, using advocacy as the warp and legal mandates as the weft. Those with a disability today are more than people meeting a criteria list or a federal definition. They are equals with equal access and the right to be recognized as members of our collective humanity.

Today children with disabilities are being educated along side their neighborhood peers. Young adults with disabilities continue their education as university students. People with a wide range of disabilities are lucrative entrepreneurs owning their own businesses. They are television and cinema celebrities, members of government, or just plain work-a-day folk. They have moved out of the institutions and into their own homes, making their way in the world as loving married couples raising children of their own. They are your classmates, your neighbors, your officemates, your friends, your family members. They are everyday people living everyday lives.

It is imperative that we remain respectful, use appropriate language, and stay clear of the old stereotypes. We need to be ever insistent and vigilant that the old ways of language, thought, manners, and expectations are banished and no longer acceptable. If they pop out, we must revisit and reexamine how we truly value all the members of our community. We must also, in our mind's eye, stand shoulder to shoulder in front of our mirrors with our family, friends, associates and community members who also have disabilities. And with our descriptor-hats neatly tucked away in their boxes, allow our collective reflection to remind us we are all people first. ■

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WHAT TO DO OR SAY

1. Use the person's name
2. A person / people with a disability
3. A person who has...or a person with...mental retardation, intellectual disability
4. Down syndrome
5. Recognize that successful people are just that, successful
6. Show people with disabilities as active, successful participants of society
7. Person who is deaf, or is hearing impaired
8. Unable to speak
9. Person without disabilities, non-disabled person

WHAT NOT TO DO OR SAY

1. Label the person based upon their disability.
2. The disabled, the handicapped, crippled,
3. The mentally retarded, slow, retard, simple, moron mentally defective, idiot
4. Mongoloid
5. Portray successful people with disabilities as superhuman, courageous
6. Courageous, special
7. Suffers a hearing loss
8. non-verbal, dumb, mute
9. Normal person (implies person with a disability isn't normal)