Words Matter

Person First Language

Do the words used to describe you have an impact on your life? You bet! Contrary to the age-old "sticks and stones" lesson we learned as children, words do matter! They can raise or lower expectations; hurt or help; crush hopes or create dreams; and so much more.

Did you know that the first way to devalue someone is through language, by using words or labels to identify a person/group as "less-than," or not like us? Once a person or group has been identified this way, it makes it easier to justify prejudice and discrimination. Our language shapes our attitudes; our attitudes shape our language; they're intertwined. And our attitudes and language drive our actions.

Using People First Language - putting the person before the disability - and eliminating old, prejudicial, and hurtful descriptions, can move us in a new direction. People First Language is not political correctness; instead, it demonstrates good manners, respect, the Golden Rule, and more. It can change the way we see a person, and it can change the way a person sees them self. People First Language (PFL) represents a more respectful, accurate ways of communicating. People with different abilities are not their diagnoses or disabilities; they are people, first.

So let's put People First Language into action. Remember, when communicating about individuals, the best practice is to avoid putting a label or condition prior to an individual's name or title.

- Do not refer to a person's abilities unless it is relevant...
  REMEMBER, people are PEOPLE FIRST, DISABILITY SECOND!
  Examples : "Susan, who was diagnosed with cancer two years ago, is now in remission," or "Jenny has fibromyalgia, a condition that causes symptoms such as muscle spasms and fatigue."

- Use disability rather than "handicap" to refer to a person's abilities.

- Avoid negative or sensational descriptions of a person's abilities.
  Examples: "Jim suffers daily from severe epilepsy," rather say "Jim, an individual with epilepsy, takes time each day to address his needs.

- Don't use "normal" to describe people without disabilities; instead say people without disabilities or typical, if comparisons are necessary.

- Don't portray people with disabilities as overly courageous, brave, special, or super human.
  Example: "Autistic children bravely face enormous challenges each day." instead try "Children with autism spends their days working on their abilities."

WORDS THAT WORK AND THOSE THAT DON'T

When referring to a person's disability, use people first language. Here is a list of phrases and terms that are appropriate when using person-first language as well as some terms and phrases to avoid.

Preferred

individual with a different abilities
accessible parking accommodations
nondisabled
individual with different abilities
individual with epilepsy
individual who has autism
individual with learning challenges
individual with multiple sclerosis (MS)
individual who is visually impaired
individual who is deaf/hearing impaired
individual who uses a wheelchair
individual of short stature
stroke survivor
individual with dyslexia

Avoid

handicapped accessible
special children
able-bodied
crippled
autistic
physically challenged
handicapped
epileptic
slow learner
person who suffers from MS
the blind
the deaf
wheelchair-bound
confined to a wheelchair
dwarf or midget
emotionally disturbed
suffered from a stroke
dyslexic
birth defect

Individual Support. Community Achievement.

Opening Doors
Communication Styles

IN A NUTSHELL...

How you begin a conversation can make all the difference in making those around you feel respected. Positive words can open the door for the exchange of important information and sharing of many points of view.

Being a good communicator is an important skill, it can impact not only your life but those around you. An important questions to ask yourself is, "Do you want those around you to feel valued and more encouraged to share their ideas and opinions with you?"

When communicated with those around you, use language which promotes respect and encourages more interaction rather than less.

FACILITATING STATEMENTS

These statements open the door for better communication because they treat others as equals in the conversation.

- I'm wondering what you think about...
- I'm curious about your ideas/feelings...
- I'd like to hear what you think/believe to be the case.
- I'd like to hear what your ideas are.
- I have some ideas about_____. If you'd like to hear them, let me know.
- I remember an idea that_____used, if you'd like to hear it.
- I appreciate hearing your opinion/ideas/feelings. I know about some other opinions that differ from yours, if you'd like to hear those.
- If I can be of assistance in this situation, let me know.
- I'm going to need to do some checking. I need more information.
- I'm wondering what your thoughts are on this.
- I could tell you what I would do in that situation, if you're interested.
- I'm wondering if you can think of someone who could help with this situation.
- I'm wondering if you see this situation as one in which you need help.
- I'm wondering if you want some help with this.
- What kind of help do you think you need?
- What would be helpful...?

CONTROLLING STATEMENTS

These statements do not create a sense of open communication and when used with others it makes them feel as if they are a subordinate or less than equal.

- I'm not sure you're ready for...
- You need to do it like this.
- I can't let you...
- That's not right.
- I told you...
- You don't understand.
- Don't say I didn't warn you...
- The best/easiest way is_____.
- How can I get you to do_____?
- You just had to do that, didn't you?
- You need to...
- You should...
- You can't/shouldn't...
- Take my advice...
- I'll show you how, and then you do it.
- I know best, from experience.
- Don't do it like that.
- You have to...
- Try harder...
- I wish you would (wouldn't)...
- Here, let me help you with that.