

# How to avoid using ableist language

Ableist language is any word or phrase that devalues people who have a disability. Though often inadvertent, ableist language suggests that people with disabilities are abnormal.

Ableism isn't simply a list of words we should not use, but paying attention to language can help us understand how embedded ableism really is in our communities.

Common examples of ableist language are words like, "lame," "dumb," "retarded," "blind," "deaf," "idiot," "imbecile," "nuts," "psycho," and "spaz." These terms can be associated with a person's identity or their challenges, and because of that, can be interpreted as insulting or hurtful. And every time people use them, they reinforce the idea that people with disabilities are somehow inferior.

Many of these words and phrases are used so casually that most don't consciously realize they're associated with disability. Remember, you're not a bad person or ally if you've used these words before. But if you have the ability to change the language you use, it's important to be aware of how language can perpetuate ableism.

To help, we've put together a list of words to help you get started thinking about language. This list isn't meant to be comprehensive or prescriptive. Language changes frequently and so does our need to re-evaluate how it can be used to reinforce ableism.

## Some people use the word "retarded" or "stupid" when they mean:

- Frustrating
- Irritating
- Annoying
- Obnoxious

## Some people use the word "spaz" or "retarded" when they mean:

- Silly
- Cheesy
- Dorky
- Nonsensical

## Some people use "insane" or "crazy" when they mean:

- Intense
- Amazing
- Really
- Wicked
- Awesome
- Wild
- Extremely

## Some people use "lame" when they mean:

- Bad
- Uncool
- Awful
- Unpleasant

## Some people use crazy when they mean:

- Shocking
- Unbelievable
- Overwhelming
- Outrageous
- Ridiculous
- Bizarre

## Some people use "psychopath" or "sociopath" when they mean:

- Dangerous
- Threatening
- Menacing
- Frightening

Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital believes in creating a world where every child and youth belongs. In partnership with our clients and families, we call on everybody to take action to end stigma of children and youth with disabilities.

Everyone is unique and some of these resources may not be suitable for every adult.

# Using people first language

People first language emphasizes the person, not the disability. By placing the person first, the disability is no longer a person's primary, defining characteristic. It's simply one aspect of who they are. Using people first language helps to reduce stigma and stereotypes, but it's just one way to do so.

The terms below are examples of people first language. While these suggestions are encouraged, just how a person wants to be identified is always a matter of personal preference. Not everyone uses people first language, so if you're not sure, you can always politely ask an individual what term is best to use.

## Say:

She has a disability/children with disabilities

He has a cognitive disability

He has Down syndrome

She has quadriplegia

She has a mental health condition/mental illness

He uses a wheelchair/mobility device/  
communications device

She receives special education services

He has a developmental delay/physical  
and developmental disability

Children without disabilities/ typically developing child

## Instead of:

Disabled child/children, the disabled/  
handicapped/ crippled/deformed

He is mentally disabled/retarded

He's Down's/a mongoloid

She's quadriplegic

She is mentally ill/disturbed/retarded

He is confined to a wheelchair is wheelchair bound/  
can't speak

She's in special ed

He is developmentally delayed

Normal kids

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# Using people first language

**Dear Everybody,  
Nobody expects you to know everything  
about disability. Ask questions.**

**Say:**

Does not move or speak/is non-verbal/  
communicates with eyes, devices, etc...

**Instead of:**

Mute/can't speak

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He has a hearing impairment/is deaf

He is mute

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Has a congenital disability/born without a limb

Birth defect/limbless/crippled

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Brain injury

Brain damaged

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She needs...she uses...

She has problems with...

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Accessible parking

Handicapped parking

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To learn more about ableism and ableist language, check out these disability advocates.

**Autistic Hoya**  
**Disability and Representation**  
**The Body is not an Apology**

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