For adults who are allies

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.

deareverybody.ca
For adults who are allies

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Say:</th>
<th>Instead of:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>She has a disability/children with disabilities</td>
<td>Disabled child/children, the disabled/handicapped/crippled/deformed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He has a cognitive disability</td>
<td>He is mentally disabled/retarded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He has Down syndrome</td>
<td>He's Down's/a mongoloid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She has quadriplegia</td>
<td>She's quadriplegic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She has a mental health condition/mental illness</td>
<td>She is mentally ill/disturbed/retarded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He uses a wheelchair/mobility device/communications device</td>
<td>He is confined to a wheelchair is wheelchair bound/can’t speak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She receives special education services</td>
<td>She's in special ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He has a developmental delay/physical and developmental disability</td>
<td>He is developmentally delayed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children without disabilities/typically developing child</td>
<td>Normal kids</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

**Say:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Say:</th>
<th>Instead of:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does not move or speak/is non-verbal/ communicates with eyes, devices, etc…</td>
<td>Mute/can’t speak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He has a hearing impairment/is deaf</td>
<td>He is mute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has a congenital disability/born without a limb</td>
<td>Birth defect/limbless/crippled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brain injury</td>
<td>Brain damaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She needs…she uses…</td>
<td>She has problems with…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessible parking</td>
<td>Handicapped parking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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