



Communicating with and About People with Disabilities

Legislation and the efforts of many organizations have begun to improve accessibility in buildings, increase access to education, open employment opportunities, and develop realistic portrayals of persons with disabilities in television programming and motion pictures. However, more progress needs to be made. Many people still view persons with disabilities, as individuals to be pitied, feared, or ignored. These attitudes may arise from discomfort with individuals who are perceived to be different or simply from a lack of information. Listed below are some suggestions on how to relate and communicate with and about people with disabilities. We must look beyond the disability and look at the individual's ability and capability - the things that make each of us unique and worthwhile.

Words

Positive language empowers. When writing or speaking about people with disabilities, it is important to put the person first. Group designations such as "the blind", "the deaf" or "the disabled" are inappropriate because they do not reflect the individuality, equality, or dignity of people with disabilities. Following are examples of positive and negative phrases. Note that the positive phrases put the person first.

Affirmative Phrases

Negative Phrases

person with mental retardation

retarded, mentally defective

person who is blind, person who is visually impaired

the blind

person with a disability

the disabled, handicapped

person who is deaf, person who is hard of hearing

suffers a hearing loss, the deaf

person who has multiple sclerosis

afflicted by MS

person with cerebral palsy

CP victim

person with epilepsy, person with seizure disorder

epileptic

person who uses a wheelchair

confined or restricted to a wheelchair

person who has muscular dystrophy

stricken by MD

person with a disability

crippled, lame, deformed

person without a disability

normal person (implies that the person with a disability isn't normal)

unable to speak, uses synthetic speech

dumb, mute

seizure

fit

successful, productive

has overcome his/her disability; courageous
(when it implies the person has courage because of having a disability)

person with psychiatric disability

crazy, nuts

person who no longer lives in an institution

the deinstitutionalized

says she/he has a disability

admits she has a disability