To achieve INCLUSION, COMMUNITY, and FREEDOM for people with disabilities, we must use People first Language

BY KATHIE SNOW

Who are “the handicapped”… the “disabled”? Society’s myths tell us they are:

- people who “suffer” from the “tragedy” of “birth defects”;
- paraplegic “heroes” “struggling” to become “normal”;
- “victims” of diseases “fighting” to regain their lives;
- categorically… “the disabled, the retarded, the autistic, the blind, the deaf, the learning disabled” and more.

Who are they, really?

They are moms and dads and sons and daughters…employees and employers…scientists…friends and neighbors…movie stars…leaders and followers…students and teachers…they are…people. They are people.

They are people, first.

Are you myopic or do you wear glasses?
Are you cancerous or do you have cancer?
Are you freckled or do you have freckles?
Are you handicapped/disabled or do you have a disability?

People First Language describes what a person HAS, not what a person IS.

People First Language puts the person before the disability.

Disability has been defined as a body function that operates differently.

Contrast that meaning with:

A published origin of “handicap” refers to “hand in cap,” a game where winners were penalized or put at a disadvantage. Another theory regarding the origin of the word is that it refers to a person with a disability having to beg on the street with “cap in hand.”

“Handicapped,” “Disabled,” or “People with Disabilities”: Which description is more accurate?

Using “the handicapped,” and even “the disabled,” usually evokes negative feelings (sadness, pity, fear) and creates a stereotypical perception that people with disabilities are all alike. All people who have brown hair are not alike. All people who have disabilities are not alike.

Many people who have disabilities would never think of themselves as “handicapped.”

The disability community is the largest minority group in our country. It includes people of both genders and from all religions, ethnic backgrounds, and socioeconomic levels. About the only things people with disabilities have in common with one another are:

1) having a body function that operates differently;
2) facing prejudice and discrimination, and
3) having a desire to be treated with the same dignity and respect afforded people without disabilities.

Unique to the disability community is that it’s the only minority group that any American can join in the split second of an accident. “If when it happens to you, will you have more in common with others with disabilities or with your family, friends, and co-workers?”

The Disability Rights Movement is following in the footsteps of the Civil Rights Movement of the ’60s and the Women’s Movement of the ’70s. While people with disabilities and advocates work to end discrimination and segregation in education, employment, and our communities at large, we must all work to end the prejudicial language that creates an invisible barrier to being included in the ordinary mainstream of life.

“Disability is a natural condition of the human experience,” according to the U.S. Developmental Disabilities Act and The Bill of Rights Act, 1993. Disability is not the “problem.” We need to rid ourselves of the word “problem” when talking about people’s needs! A person who wears glasses doesn’t walk around saying, “I have a problem seeing.” She would say, “I wear (need) glasses.” Recognize that a “problem” is really a need.

The real problem is attitudinal barriers. There have always been people with disabilities in our world and there always will be:

- If educators—and our society at large—perceive children with disabilities as individuals who have the potential to learn, who need the same educa-

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While people with disabilities and advocates work to end discrimination and segregation in education, employment, and our communities at large, we must all work to end the prejudicial language that creates an invisible barrier to being included in the ordinary mainstream of life.

...crucial issue. If people with disabilities are to be included in all aspects of our communities - in the very ordinary, very wonderful, very typical activities most people take for granted - then they must talk about themselves in the very ordinary, very wonderful, very typical language other people use about themselves.

Children with disabilities are children, first. The only labels they need are their names. Parents must not talk about their children in the clinical terms used by medical practitioners. A disability label is simply a medical diagnosis.

Since the parent of a child who wears glasses (medical diagnosis: myopia) doesn't say, "My daughter is myopic," why does the parent of a child who has a medical diagnosis of mental retardation say, "My daughter is retarded."

Adults with disabilities are adults, first. They must not talk about themselves the way service providers talk about them.

Since an adult with a medical diagnosis of cancer doesn't say, "I'm cancerous," why does an adult with a medical diagnosis of cerebral palsy say, "I'm disabled."

In our society, "handicapped" & "disabled" are all-encompassing terms that are misused:

- People with hearing or vision disabilities don't need "handicapped" or "disabled" parking or restrooms. People with physical disabilities do need accessible parking and restrooms.

- If a "handicapped" or "disabled" entrance has a ramp for people who use wheelchairs, does the doorway have Braille signage for people with visual disabilities?

- Accommodations that enable people with disabilities to access a facility regardless of their disabilities are accessible.

- "Disabled" is not acceptable, either. Our society "corrupts" the meaning of certain words. When the traffic report mentions a traffic jam, you'll often hear, "There's a disabled vehicle on the highway." "Disabled" in that context means "broken down."

People with disabilities are not broken.

- If a new toaster doesn't work, we return it, say "it's defective," and get a new one. Do we do that with babies who are born with disabilities? The accurate term is "congenital disability."

When we understand the meanings of words and how they're misused, we realize they are the tip of the iceberg of inappropriate and unacceptable language. When people with disabilities are referred to by their medical diagnoses, we have devalued them as human beings. When we devalue others, we devalue ourselves.

When we start calling things by their right names, when we recognize that people with disabilities are people first, we can begin to see how people with disabilities are more like people without disabilities than they are different.

When we understand that disability labels are simply medical diagnoses, we can put them in their proper perspective.

My son, Benjamin, is 11 years old. He loves the Lone Ranger, ice cream, and playing on the computer. He has blonde hair, blue eyes, and cerebral palsy. His disability is only one small piece of his life. For many people with disabilities, their medical diagnoses define who they are.

When I introduce myself to people I don't tell them I'll never be a prima...
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balletina. Like others, I focus on my strengths, the things I do well, not on what I can’t do.

I don’t say, “My son can’t write with a pencil.” I say, “My son uses a computer to do his school work.” I don’t say, “My son can’t walk.” I say, “My son uses a walker and a wheelchair.” And Benjamin isn’t “wheelchair-bound.” He’s free when he uses it – free to go when and where he wants to go.

We know that a person’s self-image is strongly tied to the words used to describe that person. We’ve been told that descriptions can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If a child is told she is stupid or slow or lazy, she will probably become that. If told she’s brilliant, she’ll probably become that.

People with disabilities, having been described by their medical diagnoses all their lives, often must convince themselves that they are capable and have potential for success. Parents must convince themselves and their children that their kids are capable and have potential for success. If you don’t believe in yourself, it’s hard for others to believe in you.

We have the power to change all this for current and future generations. People first Language can change how people with disabilities feel about themselves. People first Language can change how society views and treats people with disabilities.

Benjamin goes ballistic when he hears “handicapped.” I hope when he’s grown, labels will be extinct.

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**EXAMPLES OF PEOPLE first LANGUAGE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labels Not to Use</th>
<th>People first Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the handicapped or disabled</td>
<td>people with disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the mentally retarded</td>
<td>people with mental retardation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he’s retarded</td>
<td>he has a cognitive disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my son is autistic</td>
<td>my son has autism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>she’s a Down’s kid, a mongoloid</td>
<td>she has Down syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he’s learning disabled</td>
<td>he has a learning disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m a paraplegic</td>
<td>I have paraplegia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>she’s crippled</td>
<td>she has a physical disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he’s a dwarf (or midget)</td>
<td>he’s of short stature or he’s short</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>she’s emotionally disturbed</td>
<td>she has an emotional disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he’s wheelchair bound or confined to a wheelchair</td>
<td>he uses a wheelchair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>normal and/or healthy kids</td>
<td>typical kids or kids without disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he’s in special ed</td>
<td>he receives special ed services or additional support services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>handicapped parking, bathrooms, etc.</td>
<td>accessible parking, bathrooms, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>she has a problem with</td>
<td>she has a need for</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Keep thinking.
There are lots more examples out there.
And practice, practice, practice.
Old habits die hard!