

# Using People-First Language

Educators have great influence to impact the actions, attitudes, and language of their students, colleagues, and families. Words are powerful and can foster positive images and abilities or perpetuate negative connotations. Being aware of and using People-First Language is a simple way to define a student's value and potential.

## People-First Language

People-First Language is defined as choosing words about people with disabilities that define the person first, not the disability. It is important to define who the person "is" before defining what disability the person "may have." Language is powerful and our words impact how others are viewed. For example, when we refer to "a student who receives special education services" in preference to "a special education student," we maximize the potential of the student while minimizing the impact of the disability.

## Presume Competence\*

As teachers, it is our responsibility to presume the competence of all students in our classrooms. Presuming competence means assuming all individuals:

- Are intellectually complex,
- Desire to have meaningful interactions and opportunities, and
- Have the right to learn rigorous academic content, despite communicating differently or having other support needs.

The belief that all students are competent to learn age-appropriate, general education curriculum content aligned to the grade-level standards in the general education classroom is inherent in the "presume competence" paradigm. This paradigm views students with disabilities through the lens of ability. Presuming competence for students with disabilities increases the expectations for academic and social achievement by including them in opportunities to learn what other students their age are learning.

When teachers "presume competence," it is synonymous with the concept of "least dangerous assumption." Anne Donnellan wrote that, "The criterion of least dangerous assumption holds that in the absence of conclusive data, educational decisions ought to be based on assumptions which, if incorrect, will have the least dangerous effect on the likelihood that students will be able to function independently as adults." She concluded that, "We should assume that poor performance is due to instructional inadequacy rather than to student deficits."

If we presume competence in all students, we ensure multiple opportunities for access, participation, and progress in grade level general education curriculum.

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*"Words differently arranged have a different meaning, and meanings differently arranged have a different effect."*

*Blaise Pascal*

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\* Adapted from Donnellan, A.M. (1984). The Criterion of the Least Dangerous Assumption. *Behavioral Disorders*, v9, n2 (pp.141-50).

## Choose to Use People-First Language

Choosing to use People-First Language promotes presuming competence for all students. It is only important to refer to a student's disability if it is relevant to the conversation or situation. This ensures that the emphasis is placed on the student, not the disability. Many labels used in our society have negative connotations and can be misleading. Using labels contributes to negative stereotypes and devalues the person one attempts to describe. Disability is just another label.

People who have disabilities are present in every aspect of society: moms and dads, sons and

daughters, employees and employers, friends and neighbors, scientists and movie stars, leaders and followers, teachers and students . . . they are people. Most importantly, they are people first.

## Language is Power

Using People-First Language provides us with the opportunity to view all students through the lens of their abilities. Words really do matter. Below are phrases that promote People-First Language, and phrases that we should avoid.

People-First Language	Language to Avoid
student(s) who receive special education services	special education student(s); the IEP kids
student who uses a wheelchair	wheel-chair bound
student with an intellectual disability	mentally retarded
student with a learning disability	dyslexic; LD kid
student with a disability	crippled, physically challenged, handicapped
student with cerebral palsy	person who suffers from cerebral palsy
student who is deaf or hearing impaired	deaf kid

## You Can Make a Difference!

Restate the phrases below to reflect People-First Language.

	People-First Language	Language to Avoid
A		the epileptic
B		special needs kids
C		the emotional support kid

Suggested responses can be found at the bottom of page 3.

## General Guidelines for Modeling People-First Language

- Refer to a person's disability only if it is relevant to the conversation.
- Use the term "disability" not "handicap" when referring to a person's disability.
- Use positive language when describing a person's disability to eliminate stereotypes. Words such as "suffers from, a victim of, or afflicted with" portray sympathy or pity toward people with disabilities.
- Use language such as a "person without a disability" if necessary to make comparisons. Words such as "normal, regular, or able-bodied" used to describe people without disabilities imply that people with disabilities are of lesser value.
- Define all people by the multiple characteristics they possess.
- Use the "people" word first (e.g., the girl who has, the boy with, the student who)
- Create a caring classroom community by modeling People-First Language for your students and by guiding your students to use People-First Language throughout all interactions.

## Disability Etiquette

Disability etiquette is a term that is used to describe a heightened awareness of the impact our actions and words may have on people with and without a disability. Actions such as leaning on a student's wheelchair, talking too close or not at eye level, anticipating every need and providing support even when it is not warranted or requested, are behaviors that can be considered intrusive and uncomfortable for a student with a disability.

Instead, consider the following:

- Respect personal space.
- Use language that is consistent with the age of your student.
- Talk to the student at his or her eye level.
- Ask questions to determine whether the student needs assistance. This provides the student with opportunities for choice and independence.
- Monitor your volume and tone to match the situation and the student. Talking loudly or too slowly is unnecessary in most situations.

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*People-First Language can be a practice that relates to all students. It puts the person first before any defining quality or quantification. It allows one to see the person first, and any defining characteristics second. People are made up of a variety of characteristics; one alone doesn't define us. We are not the "blonde kid," the "soccer boy," or the "violin girl," but we are people who happen to have blonde hair, play soccer, or have mastered the violin. Being defined as a label is stigmatizing, limiting, and damaging in how we are perceived by others. Using People-First Language in our classrooms and school community with all students gives us the opportunity to value and celebrate the student first.*

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Suggested Responses from page 2.

A	student with epilepsy
B	students who receive special education services
C	student who receives emotional support services

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