Using Words with Dignity:

Terms and Guidelines to Accurately Portray People with Disabilities

Language is a powerful tool that shapes ideas, perceptions, and ultimately attitudes. Words mirror society's attitudes and perceptions towards people with disabilities. Attitudes can be the most difficult barrier people with disabilities face in achieving acceptance into society.

Language use is always changing as people with disabilities become more fully included. People with disabilities ask that respectful terms be used when writing and speaking about them or issues that may affect their lives.

Awareness of Terms

- The term handicap is a social or environmental barrier that disadvantages an individual who has a disability (*e.g.,* lack of access to a building because of stairs).
- The term disability is a universal human experience. Every human being will experience a decrease in their health and thereby a degree of disability at some point in their life (WHO, 2001).
- The terms handicap and retarded are unacceptable and disrespectful terms when writing and speaking about people with disabilities.
- The term behavioural disability should be used with caution and recognized more as a behaviour difficulty that could be caused by an external factor such as an environmental barrier, medical condition or living situation.

Terminology Guidelines

- Use person-first terminology as he/she is a person first and their disability is only one part of who they are.
- If the disability is not relevant, it is not necessary to make reference to it.
- If you are unsure, ask the person what language he/she feels comfortable with.
- Be careful with words and phrases that set people with disabilities apart from others (*e.g.,* we/they, special needs, healthy, normal, challenged).

Instead of	Try
Confined to a wheelchair	Wheelchair user
The disabled	People with disabilities
Handicapped	Person with a disability
Cognitive impairment	Cognitive disability
Birth defect	Person with a congenital disability
The blind	People who are blind or have a visual disability
Autistic children	Children with autism
Mentally retarded	Developmental disability
Crippled	Person with a mobility disability
Midget	Person of short stature or little person

This document was developed in consultation with the Office of Disability Issues and Public Services Commission. This information was partially obtained from Human Resources and Social Development Canada and The City of Regina Equal Opportunity—Getting our Message Across.

Saskatchewan Ministry of Education

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