

This brochure is a publication of the Maine Developmental Disabilities Council. The Council is a federally-funded, independent organization with members from across the state, including persons with disabilities, family members, and representatives of public and private agencies which provide services and/or funding for services for individuals with developmental disabilities. The Council is involved in advocacy and systems change activities, with the goal that individuals with developmental disabilities of all ages are fully included, integrated and involved in their communities and the decisions impacting them.

The Council's work is governed by the federal Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act, which defines a "developmental disability" as a severe chronic disability that is attributable to a mental or physical impairment or combination thereof, manifested before the individual attains age 22 and likely to continue indefinitely, which results in substantial functional limitations in 3 or more of the following areas of major life activity: self-care; receptive and expressive language; learning; mobility; self-direction; capacity for independent living and economic self-sufficiency.



## Maine Developmental Disabilities Council

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## A Guide to Using People First Language and Communicating with People with Disabilities

**"The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug."**

—MARK TWAIN

## What is People First Language?

*People First language* promotes understanding, respect, dignity and a positive view of people with disabilities. *People First language* puts the person first in thought and word, and emphasizes abilities, not limitations.

## Why should you use People First Language?

People with disabilities are, first and foremost, people—people who have individual abilities, interests and needs. About 49 million Americans—one out of every five individuals—have some type of disability. Their contributions enrich our communities and society as they live, work and participate alongside us.

Every individual—regardless of sex, age, race or ability—deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. As part of efforts to eliminate discrimination and segregation, it is important to use language that demonstrates respect for all people.

## Ten Commandments of Communicating with People with Disabilities

1. Speak directly to the person, rather than to a companion or interpreter, and use a normal tone of voice.
2. Offer to shake hands when introduced.
3. Always identify yourself and anyone with you when meeting someone with a visual disability.
4. If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted.
5. Treat adults as adults.
6. Do not lean against or hang on someone's wheelchair.
7. Listen attentively. If you have difficulty understanding something a person says, ask for clarification.
8. Place yourself at eye level when speaking with someone seated or in a wheelchair.
9. To get the attention of a person who has a hearing disability, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand.
10. Relax.

## Examples of Appropriate People First Language

SAY:	INSTEAD OF:
Person with a disability	Disabled person, handicapped person
Person with autism	Autistic person
Person with Down Syndrome	Mongoloid, retarded person
Person with a Cognitive Disability	Mentally retarded person
Person who is deaf; person with a hearing impairment	Deaf, deaf-mute, deaf and dumb person
Person who is blind; person with a vision impairment	Blind person
Person who uses a wheelchair	Person confined or restricted to a wheelchair, wheelchair bound
Accessible Room/Entrance/Parking	Handicapped Parking/Room/Entrance
Person with Mental Illness	Mentally ill person, Schizophrenic
Person with a physical disability	Crippled, lame, handicapped person
Person with a brain injury	Brain damaged person
Person without disabilities	Normal person, healthy person
Person who needs/uses...	Person with special needs

## People First Language Guidelines

- Recognize that people with disabilities are ordinary people with goals and interests just like everyone else.
- Avoid describing people with disabilities as groups, as in: the disabled, the deaf, the blind. Use People First language to tell what a person HAS, not what a person IS.
- Avoid negative words that imply tragedy, such as afflicted with, suffers from, or victim of.
- Do not use the term *special* as a euphemism or to indicate difference. For example, don't say: *special school, special bus, special needs or a special person.*
- Avoid cute euphemisms such as *physically challenged, inconvenienced or differently-abled.*
- Recognize that a disability is not a challenge to be overcome. Don't say "he/she succeeded *in spite of a disability.*" Ordinary activities and accomplishments do not become extraordinary just because they are done by a person with a disability.
- Use *handicap* to refer to a barrier created by people or the environment. Use *disability* to indicate a person's functional limitation that interferes with that person's mental, physical or sensory abilities. For example, people with disabilities who use wheelchairs are handicapped by stairs.
- Do not refer to a person as *bound to* or *confined to* a wheelchair. Instead, say a person *uses* a wheelchair. Wheelchairs and other assistive devices are liberating to people with disabilities, not restrictive.

## When Speaking to a Person with a Disability:

- **Speak directly to the individual** rather than to a companion or interpreter.
- **Presume Competence.** Treat adults as adults. Do not assume a person with a disability is of below average intelligence or needs to be spoken down to. Do not be patronizing or condescending.
- **Listen attentively** and wait for the person to finish, even if you do not understand something the person says. Never pretend to understand—instead ask the person to clarify or repeat the parts you missed.
- **Place yourself at eye-level** with the person you are speaking to.
- **Use a normal tone of voice** just as you would use when speaking with anyone else. Do not raise your voice or speak as though talking to a child.