



Use of language: special educational needs, disabilities and bullying

Disablist language

We cannot escape the power of language. The age-old phrase 'sticks and stones may break my bones – but words will never hurt me' has been proved untrue. Repetitive use of disablist language can have a lasting effect on the self-esteem and mental health of the person experiencing this language.

We know that when words like 'retard', 'spastic' or 'mong' are used they offend people with disabilities, their families and friends; and yet we hear them all the time in the media. We need to be very clear with young people that this type of language is not acceptable to use - in the same way that using racist, homophobic and sexist words is wrong.

There should be clarity from schools and other professionals working with children and young people that this type of language is offensive and can hurt others. It can sometimes be helpful for schools to undertake activities where they agree, as part of their inclusion policy descriptions, words that are positive and acceptable, and the schools' position when negative and derogatory language is used.

Some words have been taken out of their original context, and by repeated negative use, now have negative and derogatory connotations (e.g. spastic is a medical descriptive term, but has become a term used to tease, taunt and belittle children and adults). Some words and language also have historical contexts that make their use unwelcome and unacceptable.

Here is a list about the use of language for children and young people with disabilities to allow you to set the best example for the young people you work with. It is not exhaustive, but is a starting point.

Phrases to avoid

Handicap, handicapped.

Victim / afflicted / suffering from

Phrases to say

Disability, or person with a disability. Emphasise the person, not the disability. It is widely believed that this word is derived from Victorian times, when many disabled people had to beg for money and so went "cap in hand"

This perpetuates the view that disabled children

a condition

or adults are victims that require pity, or who bear a burden caused by their impairment. This social model of disability believes that although individuals have impairments, it is society that disables them through the barriers that are placed physically, attitudinally, and socially. Use of terms such as victim or afflicted does not support the social model.

Wheelchair bound/confined

Disabled people usually don't feel that they 'suffer' from a condition/disability and you shouldn't make that assumption. You should say 'a young person who has Down's Syndrome' or 'a child who is blind' emphasise on the person first. Wheelchair user, or essential wheelchair user. Confined again implies a negative and pitiful position. Wheelchair user describes individuals who may need to use a wheelchair but may have some mobility, whilst essential wheelchair user describes someone who has no mobility and needs to always use their wheelchair.

Deaf and dumb

Person who uses a wheelchair or has a wheelchair. Most people who use a wheelchair do not regard them as confining. They are viewed as liberating.

A person who is deaf, hearing impaired, or hard of hearing. Most people with hearing impairments are capable of speech. The term 'dumb' should never be used to describe a child or young person.

Normal, healthy (when used as the opposite of disabled)

Non-disabled. This again supports the social model of disability. Use of normal implies that anyone who is different is therefore "abnormal"

The deaf. The visually impaired.
The disabled.

A person who is deaf, etc. State the person or individual before the disability.

Spastic, mong, retarded, deformed, defective, crippled, dumb, etc. These words are offensive, dehumanising, degrading and stigmatising

When it is appropriate to refer to an individual's disability, choose the correct terminology for specific disability. Use terms such as cerebral palsy, Down's Syndrome, mental illness, spina bifida, quadriplegia, seizure disorder, speech impairment, specific learning disability etc

SEND children/young people/learner/pupil

Learner/pupil/child/young person with SEND. Never put the 'label', disability, condition in front of the person.

Down's baby/child/leaner etc

Bullying language

Victim and bully labels – we try to avoid labeling children and young people as ‘bullies’ or ‘victims’. We do this for a number of reasons:

- You don’t necessarily have all the facts around bullying incidents so to label children and young people may be inaccurate.
- It’s not always straightforward bully/victim situation.
- To label a young person as a ‘bully’ could potentially be damaging. You are essentially saying that person is ‘bad’ and this is rarely the case for a young person and in the same way as saying ‘SEND children’ and not seeing the child or young person first will not encourage young people to look at their bullying behaviour.

One of our coaches as part of the schools programme said:

"Whether it is perpetrator or bully I am wary of what in CBT (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy) terms would be called Universal Signifiers or 'Always and Everywhere' labels which describe a person rather than an aspect of their behaviour. In practical terms, when engaging with parents I have found that asking something like 'We have found that your child is a bully and we would like you to help us sort it out' gets a powerful defensive reaction, questioning the truth of the situation, finding others to blame including staff and other children and resistance to engaging with solution finding. Pointing out that their child has a difficult and damaging relationship with another child that could have serious consequences on both sides and asking for their help in resolving it urgently tends to get a different response. Similarly, those on the receiving end need a message that they are having a specific problem in one aspect of their lives which is temporary and capable of resolution, and does not infect every aspect of their being. They are only 'victims' in a clearly defined area of their lives, not Victims."

Further reading:

What to say/not to say – Down’s Syndrome Association: <http://www.downs-syndrome.org.uk/news-and-media/media-centre/what-to-say-not-say.html>