



The Importance of Positive Communication to Children with Disabilities

The Power of Language

Our word choices have a tremendous impact on those around us. Children, especially, are deeply influenced by the language surrounding them – who they become is based on who they are learning to be. The staff of Shriners Hospitals for Children® understands the importance of building confidence and self-esteem in our patients at an early age. Our staff recognizes that while working with children with disabilities, it is imperative to help them develop a strong positive attitude so they will have the confidence to pursue their dreams. To accomplish this, being mindful of the effect language has on children is critical.

Two essential points in using communication as affirmation are accurate wording and people-first language. Always remember to use language that encourages, rather than discourages, the individual. When referring to those with a disability, please remember to **avoid labels with a negative connotation**, such as:

- crippled
- handicapped
- lame
- deformed

» **The preferred word choice is usually:**

- disability
- disabled
- the actual term involved, such as, cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy

People with Disabilities are People First

The second key element of communicating with people with disabilities is the need to use “people-first language,” where the person is the important element, rather than the disability.

For example, try using phrases such as “a person *with* cerebral palsy” or “a person *who uses* a prosthetic arm,” rather than defining them by the disability itself.

It is also important to recognize that people are individuals, and to **avoid lumping those with disabilities together into one group**, like “the disabled,” “the spinal cord injured,” or to refer to “all people with X.”

» Another important aspect of using people-first language is to **avoid negative descriptive phrases and terms**, such as:

- confined to a wheelchair
- wheelchair bound
- victim stricken with
- suffering

Instead, try saying a person “uses a wheelchair,” or “has cerebral palsy.”



“We must take language very seriously. The feeling I have is that language is always a reflection of attitude. With the advancement of the disability movement, you see a change in language.” – Michael Masutha

Also avoid **value-laden words and phrases**, whether negative or positive, because even seemingly positive labels such as “courageous” and “inspirational” can be burdensome to a child, setting unnecessary high expectations, that may be hard to maintain.

As part of using people-first language, it is also imperative to not define people by their disabilities. This is accomplished by **emphasizing abilities, not limitations**.

» For instance:

- Say: “Darlene is an excellent writer,” rather than, “Despite her disability, Darlene is an excellent writer.”
- Say, “Johnny is a child with a disability,” instead of the defining, “Johnny is a *disabled child*.”

Being mindful of preferred disability terminology and using people-first language whenever possible will help children with disabilities become more confident and able to become successful, productive adults.

