

# What's In A Word?

Words, whether spoken or signed, are the basic means by which people communicate. Words are powerful tools which can affirm and empower. At the same time, the misuse of words can belittle and demean. Language used to describe people with disabilities often focuses on lack of ability rather than on competency. Age-old terms such as “deaf and dumb,” “invalid,” or “idiot” continue to be used despite their disrespectful tone and the inaccurate message they convey.

When we write or speak about people with disabilities, we should choose words with care in order to promote dignity and a positive image. The following suggestions, adapted from guidelines developed by Paraquad, Inc.,<sup>1</sup> and The Research and Training Center on Independent Living,<sup>2</sup> may assist in this process.

- If the disability isn't germane to the story or conversation, don't mention it.
- A person is not a condition; therefore, avoid describing a person in such a manner. Don't present someone as an “epileptic.” Rather say “he has epilepsy.”
- Do not portray successful people with disabilities as superhuman; this raises false expectations that all disabled people should reach this level.
- Do not sensationalize a disability by use of such terms as “afflicted with,” “victim of,” “suffers from.”
- Do not use generic labels for disability groups such as “the retarded.”

The following terms should be avoided because they have negative connotations and evoke pity:

abnormal	imbecile	pitiful	tragedy
burden	maimed	poor	unfortunate
deformed	moron	spastic	
disformed	palsied	stricken with	
incapacitated	pathetic	suffer	

The chart on the following page demonstrates the power of words to dignify or demean those they describe:

---

<sup>1</sup> Paraquad, “Words with Dignity” fact sheet (St. Louis: Paraquad, n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Research and Training Center on Independent Living. “Guidelines for Reporting and Writing About People with Disabilities.” 3d ed. (Lawrence, KS: the center, 1990).

<b>Words with Dignity</b>	<b>Words to Avoid</b>
person with a disability, disabled	crippled, handicapped, invalid (literally, invalid means “not valid”)
person who has, person who experienced, person with	victim, afflicted by or with
non-disabled	normal (referring to non-disabled people as “normal” insinuates that people with disabilities are abnormal)
uses a wheelchair	restricted, confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair bound (the chair enables mobility), wheelchair person
deaf, nonverbal	deaf mute, deaf and dumb, dummy
disabled since birth, born with	birth defect
emotional disorder, mental illness	crazy, insane, mental case, psycho
seizures	fits
developmental delay	slow
has a physical disability or spinal curvature	deformed, misshapen, hunchbacked
has multiple or severe disabilities	vegetable, creature, freak
person with mental retardation	retard, idiot

It is important to approach the use of words with the proper attitude. Language varies due to a number of factors including geography, culture and personal preference. While we may make general recommendations as in the information above, language is fluid, and what is acceptable one day may no longer be so at a later date. Often terminology changes as a certain word acquires negative connotations and becomes a stereotype. People then focus on a new word, hoping that it will bring acceptability. Words alone, however, cannot build acceptance, and thus the ongoing evolution.

While many urge “people first” language, some disability activists prefer to emphasize the disability as a unifying factor (see “Talk about words, dignity and a touch of love” as well as “Is it still the ‘person first,’ then the disability?”). We include the following articles to demonstrate the variety of opinions currently espoused in the disability community. The article by Fr. Bill Connell urges compassion and sensitivity when encountering people whose use of language differs from your own. We concur with Fr. Bill's approach, and urge our readers to use words which dignify people with disabilities. At the same time, however, we suggest that you be open to new ideas and considerate of those whose language may vary from your own.

*This article may be reprinted provided you credit the source:*  
**Opening Doors**, National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities  
Washington, D.C.