

*“Denial of the opportunity for participation is denial of human dignity and democracy.
It will not work.”*

-Saul Alinsky

Introduction

What exactly does the term “People First” mean? “People First” is a mindset, a way of using language, and a way of seeing the inhabitants of our world as equals. Essentially, it means just what it says; people are people first. People do not fit into slots—handicapped, disabled, mentally ill, crippled. You sort the mail, not people. A person should never be categorized or identified solely by their disability.

Historically, a disability has been seen as a “problem,” as something “wrong.” By perceiving a disability as something lacking, we run the risk of carrying this belief over to the person and viewing *them* as lacking. For instance, how would you feel if people viewed you as less than whole because you have asthma, wear eyeglasses, or have trouble hearing? These are all aspects of ones’ individuality, but in no way define who a person is! Our society has a tendency to view disabilities as tragic. Pity is typically the response to these perceived “tragedies.” In reality, the problem does not lie within people who have disabilities, but within societal attitudes and perceptions. Commonly, people who have disabilities don’t view their disability as a problem, but as an attribute. What a wonderful concept to think that all of society could have the same view!

So what steps can be taken to correct these misperceptions? Hopefully you will come up with some answers to that question as you explore the links on this page. A good place to start is with People First Language. Before being able to discuss issues about disability, one should know *how* to talk about disability. Some exercises and

activities have been provided for you so that you may gain a better understanding and awareness of people with disabilities and the issues and attitudes that they face everyday.

Stereotypes, Myths & Facts

Stereotypes are commonly formed when we have little or no information about groups of people who are different from ourselves and our peer groups. Unfortunately, stereotypes tend to be negative and derogatory in nature. Stereotypes have been created for just about every group of people in our society; women, blondes, people who are gay, people of any ethnic or cultural background different from ours, and of course, people with disabilities. Take a moment to think about possible stereotypes centered on people with disabilities. Which ones can you think of?

Some common stereotypes include:

- ❖ They are stupid
- ❖ They are lazy
- ❖ They are strange
- ❖ They are crippled
- ❖ They lead completely different lives than people who do not have disabilities
- ❖ They are more content with other people who also have disabilities
- ❖ They are deserving of pity
- ❖ They can't do things for themselves

These are some of the more common beliefs society tends to hold towards people with disabilities, but I'm sure you were able to think of some others! Notice in this list the use of the word "they." "They" are strange. "They" are stupid. In this context, even the use of this word connotes separation from the norm. It insinuates an 'us versus them' mentality. You'll learn more about how to avoid such language by clicking on the Person First Language link on this page. To find out if you are currently holding on to any stereotypes or myths about people with disabilities, take a look at the following myths and facts.

Myth: Persons with disabilities are inspirational, courageous, and brave for being able to overcome their disability.

Fact: Persons with disabilities are simply carrying on normal activities of living when they drive to work, go grocery shopping, pay their bills, or compete in athletic events.

Myth: Persons with disabilities need to be protected from failing.

Fact: Persons with disabilities have a right to participate in the full range of human experiences including success and failure. Employers should have the same expectations of, and work requirements for, all employees.

Myth: The lives of people with disabilities are completely different than those without disabilities.

Fact: People with disabilities go to school, go to work, are involved in intimate relationships, have families, shop, pay taxes, vote, and have similar dreams and desires that other people do.

Myth: People who are blind have a sixth sense.

Fact: People with blindness often do tend to develop their remaining senses more highly than others, but they do not have a sixth sense.

Myth: People with disabilities have different goals than people without disabilities.

Fact: People with disabilities come from a wide range of social, cultural, and economic backgrounds, just like anybody else. Therefore, their goals are as varied and different as yours and mine are.

Myth: People with disabilities have problems getting around.

Fact: People with disabilities know what accommodations they need to get around and make use of them successfully. It's only when attitudinal or architectural barriers get in the way that problems arise.

ACTIVITY

Visit the following website and read the points under the following headings: "Stereotypes", "Attitudes", and "Myths about Job Corp Students with Disabilities". After reading this information, click on the "Test Your Knowledge" link that is located at the top of the page and complete the short multiple choice quiz.

http://www.jobcorpshealth.com/disability/html/awareness_a.htm

Discrimination

Unfortunately, discrimination is a large part of our country's history. Most of us are aware of the abuse and unethical treatment African-Americans suffered prior to and during the Civil Rights movement. What many don't know is that people with disabilities were also segregated and treated as "second-class citizens." It wasn't so long ago that children with disabilities were considered "uneducable" and "untrainable." They were either institutionalized or kept home. In most cases, public education was not even an option.

When public education did become a reality, with the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975, the right to a free, *appropriate*, public education was still being violated for many students with disabilities. While they were able to attend public schools, many were still not receiving an appropriate education. Many teachers considered these students a distraction to the learning of the rest of the class. Or they still believed, law or no law, that these students were uneducable. In turn, many students with disabilities, although given access to public schools, were simply placed in the back of the classroom and ignored for the duration of the school day. These students were not being taught the skills they needed.

We have come a long way in regards to acknowledging and honoring the rights of individuals with disabilities in the last several decades. However, more progress can always be made. We can do our part by keeping an open mind, advocating for the rights of individuals with disabilities, and seeing people for who they are and the gifts they have to contribute. Whether we intend to or not, many of us do have hidden biased beliefs about people with disabilities. Our beliefs may have been shaped by our upbringing, our peers, or our society and we may not even be aware that we have them!

ACTIVITY

Think about the types of discrimination (if any) that you witness in your school or community. Identify some of those biases. Now think about your own hidden biases. After some consideration, make a list of any stereotypes or biases that you feel *you* still have. Where do these biases come from? How can you rid yourself of them? Jot your ideas down along with your list.

Disability Awareness

True or False: Students with disabilities are completely different than students without disabilities.

Given common views and perceptions about students with disabilities, it is understandable if you thought this was a true statement. However, it is not. Students with disabilities are just like other students. They are people experiencing the same things as everyone else—dreams, desires, fears, likes, and dislikes. They are experiencing the same challenges and changes as they move from adolescence to adulthood. Of course all people differ from one another in some respects—not everybody is *exactly* the same! What differences students with disabilities do have are in terms of their needs.

Sometimes students with disabilities require devices, aids, or services for their different needs. These needs, however, do not make a person inherently different, just as needing crutches for a broken leg would not make you different from your peers! It is extremely important for people to recognize that although people with disabilities may require special needs or have areas of limitations, they also have many strengths, capabilities, talents, and ways to contribute to their families, friends, co-workers, and society. To become more aware, consider the following:

- **Talk to people with disabilities about what they want.** Often, people talk for and about people with disabilities, but without them. People should always be given choices about how to live their lives. Remember that people with disabilities should always be involved, if not completely in charge of, decisions regarding their lives.
- **Show respect.** While in the presence of a person with a disability, do not talk about them as if they were not there. Do not make the assumption that the person you are speaking of is completely incapable of understanding what you say. And remember: just because a person does not communicate verbally does not mean they can't still understand what you are saying!
- **Be empathetic.** This is not the same as being sympathetic. Try to view the actions and words of a person with disabilities from their perspective. What you may view as non-compliance, manipulation, or stubbornness may be the only way that the person can exert some control over their life. Not everybody communicates in the same way. When you come across an action or behavior

that is unfamiliar or peculiar to you, ask yourself what that person may be trying to communicate to you.

- **Recognize the importance of relationships.** People with disabilities are not “loners.” Just like everyone else, they desire and need meaningful connections to others.
- **Educate yourself.** If you have questions or are curious regarding people with disabilities, seek answers! Become familiar with the issues surrounding disability. Become familiar with the different types of disabilities. When you are unclear about something, assuming is the worst thing you can do. That’s how those stereotypes come about.
- **Vote.** If you feel strongly about certain disability issues that come up, find out more about them and vote for what you believe!
- **Be positive.** Far too often, people focus on what people with disabilities can’t do. You can show people how to stay positive by focusing instead on all of the things that people with disabilities can do. This can be as easy as changing the way you phrase certain sentences. For example:

Instead of:

She has reading problems.

He’s nonverbal.

He can’t walk.

She can’t feed herself.

Say:

She needs books with large print.

He communicates with his eyes and hands.

He uses a power chair.

She needs assistance with eating.

Now that you have expanded your awareness, think about the people in your school who have a disability. Have you been viewing them as just another typical peer, or have you singled them out in your mind and viewed them differently—as being separate from the rest? Now that you have educated yourself, you can educate your peers. Help them to understand there is nothing inherently different about people with disabilities. Their needs may differ from yours but they are experiencing the same feelings as you and your friends at this stage in your life.

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

-Mark Twain

Person First Language

You would think words—a mere arrangement of letters—would be harmless. But how many times have you been offended, hurt, or deeply saddened by something somebody has said to you? Or maybe when somebody has called you a nasty name? Words are extremely powerful. Words alone have the power to hurt people. They have the ability to create negative stereotypes and attitudinal barriers. Think of it this way: People with disabilities are the only minority group in which anybody can join at any time. Should you become a member of this community, how would you want to be referred to?

So what exactly is “Person First Language?” It is simply the act of putting the person before the disability. It also describes what a person *has*, not what a person *is*.

For example, it would be inappropriate to say “She is retarded.” Instead, use people first language to say, “She has a cognitive disability,” or, “she has an intellectual disability.”

Below are more examples of people first language.

Instead of:

Say:

The handicapped or disabled

People with disabilities

He’s autistic

He has autism

She is learning disabled

She has a learning disability

She is a quadriplegic

She has a physical disability

He is confined to a wheelchair

He uses a wheelchair

Some of the terms that are still used in our society are archaic and offensive. For instance, “handicapped” and “crippled” are inappropriate terms that still get thrown around quite a bit. These are derogatory terms that can evoke pity, fear, or even disgust. Another inappropriate descriptor is “disabled.” This term refers to something that is broken down (such as a disabled vehicle). People with disabilities are not broken! By using inappropriate language—language that is not people first—we are labeling people according to their disability. Labeling can have an extremely stigmatizing effect on people and those labels tend to stay with them for a long time. Just remember, labeling people leads to harmful portrayals and stereotypes. The only label a person—any person—should ever have is their name!

ACTIVITY

Write a reflection piece in which you imagine you are a person with a disability. The disability you will “have” is your choice. Below are some guidelines and ideas that you may wish to write or think about.

- 1) Briefly describe what disability you have chosen.
- 2) How would having this disability affect your life (school, work, extra-curricular activities, social life)?
- 3) How would you want, or expect, to be treated?
- 4) How would you want others to refer to your disability?
- 5) Would you feel you had more in common with other people with disabilities, or your family and friends without disabilities?
- 6) What kinds of accommodations or supports do you think you would need to go to school, go to work, and live and get around in the community?