

Changing How We Talk About Disabilities

This video addresses the importance of using respectful and positive language when talking about students with disabilities.



Key understandings

- Words can shape our ideas, perceptions and attitudes about ourselves and others.
- When we see a diagnosis or disability as the defining characteristic of an individual student, we devalue that person as an individual.
- Using language that puts people first (such as 'a student with a disability' rather than 'a disabled student') acknowledges that individuals with disabilities are first and foremost people.
- When discussing specialized supports and services, it may be more helpful to describe what the student *needs* (based on their strengths, challenges, interests and experiences) instead of focusing on their *disability*.

“

*Using people first language—
putting the person before the
disability—and eliminating old,
prejudicial and hurtful descriptors,
can move us in a new direction.*

”

*Kathie Snow
Disability is Natural*

“

*People with disabilities are not
their diagnoses or disabilities;
they are people, first.*

”

*Kathie Snow
Disability is Natural*

Questions for discussion

- What was your reaction to the statement "just like gender, ethnicity, and other traits, a disability is simply one of the many natural parts of being human"?
- Thinking about your own experiences, can you recall a time when the use of language about students with disabilities created inadvertent barriers?
- How would you respond to individuals who use stereotypical references such as 'those behaviour kids' in conversations about students with disabilities?
- How could the information in this video be helpful to your work in the future?

Taking the Pulse

at the school and authority level...

- Do programming and services for students with disabilities in your school authority model respectful and positive language?

“

...like gender, ethnicity, and other traits, disability is one of many natural characteristics of being human.

”

Kathie Snow
Disability is Natural

For more information

- *Disability is Natural*—The focus of this web site is to encourage new ways of thinking about developmental disabilities, in the belief that our attitudes drive our actions. Kathie Snow challenges conventional wisdom and promotes new attitudes, new actions, and common sense about disabilities. www.disabilityisnatural.com
- *The Opportunity of Adversity*—In this 2009 TED Talk, Aimee Mullins, 1996 Paralympics Games record breaker, model and actor shares how powerful and empowering language can be for people with disabilities. www.ted.com/talks/aimee_mullins_the_opportunity_of_adversity
- *Using Words with Dignity: Terms and Guidelines to Accurately Portray People with Disabilities*
The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education developed a tip sheet of terms and guidelines to accurately portray people with disabilities. <http://education.gov.sk.ca/Using-Words-With-Dignity>

Alberta Examples

The following web sites offer information on talking about disabilities:

- *Medicine Hat Catholic Separate Regional Division*—This document describes the importance of “people-first language” in working with students with disabilities. www.mhcbe.ab.ca/docs/library/High%20Expectations%20and%20Presumption%20of%20Competence.pdf
- *Alberta Health Services*—Alberta Health Services’ guide to inclusive language for health care workers is also helpful for staff in schools. www.ccis-calgary.ab.ca/uploads/CDIS/Diversity_Resource_Centre/Inclusive_Language_-_Alberta_Health_Services.pdf

