
INCLUSION TRAINING GUIDE FOR JEWISH SUMMER CAMPS

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CHAPTER 3: PEOPLE FIRST LANGUAGE

Words Matter: “What Do We Call Him?”

Camp staff members have an important opportunity and obligation to model respectful Person First Language with all campers and fellow staff members. **Person First language means that what we see first is a person, not a skin color, not a size and not the fact that she is blind or that he has Down syndrome.** Language very much shapes thinking, and camp personnel can do immeasurable good by striving for consistency in making this linguistic shift. For example: Don't say “the disabled” say “campers with disabilities;” Don't say, “She's autism” or “he's Downs,” say, “She has autism” or “he has Down syndrome.”

People with disabilities are — first and foremost — people. People with disabilities each have unique abilities, interests and needs. About 54 million Americans—one out of every five individuals—have a disability. Their contributions enrich our communities and society as they live, work and share their lives.

Historically, people with disabilities have been regarded as individuals to be pitied, feared or ignored: disrespected and devalued members of society. They have been portrayed as helpless victims, heroic individuals overcoming tragedy and “charity cases” who must depend on others for their well-being and care. At times, some have been seen as repulsive. Media coverage frequently focused on heartwarming features and inspirational stories that reinforced stereotypes, patronized the individuals and underestimated their capabilities.

Much has changed lately. New laws, disability activism and expanded coverage of disability issues have begun increasing public understanding and eliminating the worst stereotypes and misrepresentations.

Still, old attitudes and stereotypes die hard. People with disabilities continue to seek respectful, accurate portrayals of people with the same disability as they have, that demonstrate a positive view of these individuals as active participants of society, in regular social, work and home environments. People with disabilities are focusing institutional and public attention on tough issues that affect their quality of life, such as accessible transportation, housing, affordable health care, employment opportunities and discrimination.

About People First Language

People with disabilities constitute our nation's largest and most inclusive minority group. It represents people of all ages, genders, religions, ethnicities, sexual orientations and socioeconomic levels. This minority group is also the only one that anyone can join at any time: at birth, in the split second of an accident, through illness, or during the aging process. Yet, the only things people with disabilities all share in common are societal misunderstanding, prejudice and discrimination.

If and when you join that minority, how will you want to be described?

Words matter! Old and inaccurate descriptors perpetuate negative stereotypes and reinforce an incredibly powerful attitudinal barrier—the greatest obstacle facing individuals with disabilities. A disability is, first and foremost, a medical diagnosis, and when we define people by their diagnoses, we devalue and disrespect them as individuals. Do you want to be known primarily by your psoriasis, gynecological history, or the warts on your behind? Using medical diagnoses incorrectly—as a measure of a person's abilities or potential—can ruin people's lives. Embrace a new paradigm: “Disability is a natural part of the human experience...” (U.S. Developmental Disabilities/ Bill of Rights Act). Yes, disability is natural, and it can be redefined as a “body part that works differently.” A person with spina bifida has legs that work differently, a person with Down syndrome learns differently, and so forth. People should no more be solely defined by their medical diagnoses than others should be defined by age, gender, ethnicity, religion or height. The use of a diagnosis as the most relevant trait is appropriate only in medical, educational, legal and similar settings when resource distribution is being determined.

ELIMINATING STEREOTYPES

As part of the effort to end discrimination and segregation in employment, education and communities at large, it is essential to replace prejudicial and dismissive terminology with respectful language. Every individual, regardless of sex, age, race or ability, deserves to be treated and spoken of with dignity and respect. The applicable Jewish value concept is that all people are fashioned *b'tzelem elokim* (in G-d's image), and as such, should be respected for their spark of divinity as well as their humanity.

Even if you are not yet skilled at using People First Language, you can still avoid using negative terms that stereotype, devalue and discriminate. Just as you should banish racial and ethnic slurs from your vocabulary, so, too, you should banish demeaning labels like retarded and gimpy. Just as it is appropriate to say "women" in a professional setting rather than chicks or gals, so, too, it is appropriate to refer to a camper by name, not by disability. "It's Ariella's turn," never "It's the wheelchair-bound kid's turn."

Equally important, ask yourself: **Is the disability is even relevant to your comment?** Does it need to be mentioned, or is it simply the bad habit of labeling at work? "Does Ariella like participating in softball," needs no mention of her disability, as opposed to the question: "Did we widen the path between home and first base well enough this time for Ariella to use her wheelchair on it?"

WHAT DO YOU CALL PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES?

Friends, neighbors, coworkers, dad, grandma, Joe's sister, our cousin, Mrs. Schneider, George, husband, wife, colleague, employee, boss, reporter, driver, dancer, mechanic, lawyer, student, educator, man, woman, adult, child, partner, participant, member, voter, citizen, Jim, or any other word you would use for a person.

People first language puts the person before the disability, describing what a person has, not who a person is. Are you "cancerous" or do you have cancer? Is a person "handicapped/disabled" or does she "have a disability"? Using a diagnosis as a defining characteristic reflects and reinforces prejudiced thinking. It also robs the person of the opportunity to define him/herself.

More than a fad or political correctness, People First Language is an objective way of acknowledging, communicating and reporting on disabilities. At the same time, it eliminates generalizations, assumptions and stereotypes by focusing on the person rather than the disability. A person's self-image is tied to the words used about him. A movement started by individuals who said, "We are not our disabilities," People First Language reflects good manners and should not be brushed aside as "politically correct." We have the power to create a new paradigm of disability and enrich our communities by using and modeling People First Language.

Let's reframe "problems" into "needs." Instead of, "He has behavior problems," we can say, "He needs behavioral supports." Instead of, "She has reading problems," we can say, "She needs large print." "Low-functioning" or "high-functioning" are pejorative and harmful. Machines "function;" people live! And let's eliminate the "special needs" descriptor—it generates pity and low expectations! Some guidelines:

- Recognize that people with disabilities are ordinary people with common goals for a home, a job and a family. Talk about people in ordinary terms.
- Never equate a person with a disability — such as referring to someone as retarded, an epileptic or quadriplegic. These labels are simply medical diagnoses. Use People First Language to tell what a person HAS, not what a person IS.
- Emphasize abilities not limitations. For example, say "a man walks with crutches," not "he is crippled."
- Avoid negative words that imply tragedy, such as: defect, suffers from, poor X, and unfortunate.
- Recognize that a disability is not a challenge to be overcome, and don't say people succeed in spite of a disability. Ordinary things and accomplishments do not become extraordinary just because they are done by a person with a disability. What is extraordinary are the lengths people with disabilities have to go through and the barriers they have to overcome to do the most ordinary things.
- Use "handicap" as a verb referring to a barrier created by people or the environment. Use "disability" to indicate a functional limitation that interferes with a person's mental, physical or sensory abilities, such as walking, talking, hearing and learning. For example, people with disabilities who use wheelchairs *are handicapped by stairs*.

- Do not refer to a person as bound to or confined to a wheelchair. Wheelchairs are liberating to people with physical disabilities because they provide mobility.
- Do not use “special” to mean segregated, such as separate schools or buses for people with disabilities, or to suggest that a disability itself makes someone special.
- Avoid euphemisms that avoid or diminish the disability, such as physically challenged, inconvenienced and differently abled. It may be challenging to discern the difference between these terms and person with disabilities. Remember that with People First Language the person comes first. People First phrasing does not deny or minimize the presence of a disability, as these terms do. Rather, they are verbal cues to remembering that people are people with various traits, sometimes including this or that disability. “Ariella – you know who I mean: the camper in bunk X who is always laughing and moves like the wind when running bases in her wheelchair.”
- Promote understanding, respect, dignity and positive outlooks.

“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.” – Mark Twain

PEOPLE FIRST LANGUAGE:

DISABILITY-CENTRIC LANGUAGE:

People with disabilities

the handicapped, the disabled

People without disabilities

normal, healthy, whole or typical people

Person who has a congenital disability

person with a birth defect

Person who has (or has been diagnosed with)...

person afflicted with, suffers from, victim of...

Person who has Down syndrome

Downs person, mongoloid, mongol

Person who has (or has been diagnosed with) autism

the autistic

Person with quadriplegia, with a physical disability

a quadriplegic, a paraplegic

Person with a physical disability

a cripple

Person of short stature, little person

a dwarf, a midget

Person who is unable to speak, who uses a communication device

dumb, mute

People who are blind, visually impaired

the blind

Person with a learning disability

learning disabled

Person diagnosed with a mental health condition

crazy, insane, psycho, mentally ill, emotionally disturbed, or demented

Person diagnosed with a cognitive, intellectual, or developmental disability

mentally retarded, retarded, slow, idiot, moron

Student who receives special education services

special ed student, special education student

Person who uses a wheelchair or a mobility chair

confined to a wheelchair; wheelchair bound

Accessible parking, bathrooms, etc.

handicapped parking, bathrooms, etc.