



Overview of Person-First Terminology

Language that places the person before the label is called person-first terminology. It acknowledges that a person is a person first. The label is not the person. Person-first terminology further acknowledges that a person has many different characteristics; they have strengths, interests and challenges. A disability is only one aspect of a person. For example, say “a boy with autism” instead of “an autistic boy.”

Terminology can have an impact especially for the individual described. Terminology can lift someone up or bring him down. It can also perpetuate stereotypes and influence how others not only see a person, but also how they treat the person. Terminology, therefore, needs to be respectful and model acceptance. Recognizing that terminology can influence perception, some federal, state and local Santa Clara County agencies have begun to use person-first terminology:

- Originally, Public Law 94-142, passed in 1975, was titled the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. However, in 1990 Public Law 101-476 amended the title to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
- The California Advisory Commission on Special Education strongly promotes person-first terminology in all its communications whether verbal or written.
- Local agencies here in Santa Clara County have changed terminology to be more respectful.
 - *Community Association for Retarded (CAR)* has changed to *Abilities United*.
 - *Crippled Children Services (CCS)* has changed to *California Children’s Services*.
 - *Crippled Children’s Society* has changed to *VIA Services*

The Santa Clara County Office of Education (SCCOE) serves more than 1,700 students with disabilities and supports 31 school districts that also have students with disabilities. The SCCOE offers leadership and support services to these districts. One of the SCCOE’s organizational goals is to “*be the central active leader and voice on critical education issues.*” If the SCCOE will be the central active leader and voice, that voice should be one of equity, acceptance and respect. Therefore, the SCCOE has decided to follow the lead of the federal government, state and local agencies, and has adopted a person-first terminology policy. The new policy, now included in the SCCOE’s Communication Style Guide and Use of Logo, is a guideline for SCCOE staff to ensure the use of person-first terminology in all communications, whether verbal or written. With this new policy, the SCCOE hopes to act as an agent of change for the equity, acceptance and respect for people with disabilities for not only the 31 districts in the county, but also for the cities, agencies and community of Santa Clara County.

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A Pledge of Respect for Students with Disabilities

All students, especially students with disabilities, have the right to dignity and respect. The Americans with Disabilities Act states that “Americans with disabilities... are entitled to the same rights and freedoms as everybody else: a right to belong and participate fully in the American experience; a right to dignity and respect in the workplace and beyond...” Students with disabilities have a right to be respected as a whole person and not be judged by just their disability.

To ensure this right of respect, I will use respectful language in the form of person-first terminology in my communications. I pledge to:

- ❖ Place the student first before the disability
 - *A child with autism*, instead of *an autistic child*
- ❖ Place groups of students first before the disability
 - *Students in special education*, instead of *special education students*
- ❖ Use respectful terms when referring to peer groups
 - *Students without disabilities* instead of *typical students*
- ❖ Model back person-first terminology when others do not use it
 - When someone says, “*special education students...*” just continue the conversation by modeling back, “*yes.... students in special education...*”
- ❖ Inform others about person-first terminology
- ❖ Remember that changing the way we speak is a process and takes time

For more information about person-first terminology, please contact the Inclusion Collaborative at (408) 453-6756 or visit www.inclusioncollaborative.org

Please fax to 408-453-6596

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