The HERE to HERE Language Guide:

A Resource for Using Asset-Based Language with Young People

Photo Credit: **Adrian Montanez**

Why Words Matter

The words adults use to talk to and about young people matter. Words can drive conversation, deepen understanding, and create meaningful relationships. At the same time, the language we use can perpetuate negative stereotypes, exclude or alienate people, and muddle messages, no matter who the speaker is or what their intentions. To build inclusive spaces in which young people can thrive and bring their talent to bear at work, in school, and in their communities, we must be mindful and intentional of how we as adults engage with young people on a day-to-day basis, beginning with language.

Why We Created This Guide

HERE to HERE created this guide to better understand the language that surrounds and affects young people in The Bronx and beyond--not only their feelings about their environments, but also their sense of self, connection to their community, and connection to work and learning. This guide was developed out of responses from Bronx high schoolers based on our belief that inclusive spaces in which young people thrive must be driven by students and their needs. The student perspective is critical to HERE To HERE's mission to enhance paths to rewarding careers for young people in The Bronx and New York City. You can read more about our Student Voice work in "Centering Youth Voice is Key."

Photo Credit: **Adrian Montanez**

Centering Youth Voice Is Key

HERE to HERE seeks to create spaces in which students can engage, collaborate, and explore the issues and opportunities that personally affect their path to career readiness and success.

When introducing systems change and culture shifts, oftentimes thought leaders, design thinkers and policymakers develop solutions for young people. Our student voice work brings the most impactful voices to the table in order to create with young people.

The students we serve are the most important voice in the room. With that framing at the core, our work with interns, fellows, and student ambassadors is an opportunity for young people to not only inform the decisions that will ultimately affect their lives, but also to become leaders of social and economic change for their peers and community.

What This Guide Is

This Language Guide is a resource for advocates, educators, employers, members of the media, and others to investigate the words they use when working with or for young people.

Understanding that language is constantly evolving, we know that this resource requires regular updates and continued input from young people to stay relevant. We also acknowledge that context matters, and what's appropriate in one setting may not be in another.

There are many factors that determine how we react to language. The same word or phrase could feel empowering to one person and dehumanizing to another. This guide prioritizes language that is:

- **Asset-based:** We avoid words and phrases that look at situations or people from a "deficit" lens that prioritizes what's missing or what's wrong. Instead, we prioritize language that focuses on strengths and potentials.

- **People-first:** We put the person ahead of characteristics.

- **Specific:** We opt for descriptors that clearly convey what we mean, rather than relying on generalizations or "code words" that require the reader or listener to fill in the blanks.
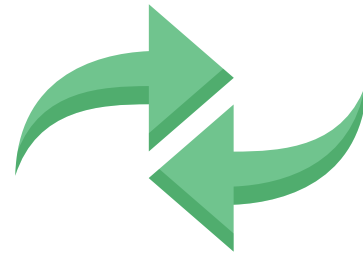
It is rarely possible to simply swap one word for another in order to eliminate a negative frame. As such, this guide comprises four sections:

✓ **Checklist: Keeping ourselves accountable**

✗ **Words and phrases to avoid**

💡 **Words and phrases that depend on context, tone, and nuance**

✓ **Leading with asset-based language**

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✓ Checklist: Keeping ourselves accountable

Identifying and eliminating problematic language from our vocabulary is not an attempt to shy away from issues facing our communities or to be "politically correct."

I n fact, this practice is just the opposite: it challenges us to communicate more clearly and accurately without falling back on stereotypes or tropes that perpetuate harmful misinformation.

In considering the language you use in conversation with young people or when preparing written or spoken material such as a job description, website content, speech, news article, opinion piece, or report, ask yourself the following set of questions. Does my language...

- ☐ Correct assumptions the reader may have about the person or group of people I am referring to?

- ☐ Avoid stereotypes about the places and communities I am referencing?

- ☐ Assign responsibility for inequities to the system(s) that create and perpetuate those inequities, rather than assigning blame to individuals?

- ☐ Humanize the subject, rather than defining them by one or several characteristics?

- ☐ Use descriptors of people or communities that are relevant and necessary for understanding the concept I am trying to convey?

- ☐ Contribute to a better or more holistic understanding of the people or communities I am discussing?

> " Politically correct terms seem to be constantly changing, so I am not comfortable saying definitively, 'use this word, instead of that word' ... Whenever possible I try to be precise, to say what I actually mean, rather than using a code word."
> **– Bronx nonprofit leader with over 25 years of experience**

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✗ Words and phrases to avoid

As shared by the students interviewed for this guide, some non-specific, overused words, like the ones listed below, have accrued negative connotations over time. They can suggest that the person or people referenced are less-than. In many cases, they invite a host of assumptions about the circumstances of a person's life that may not be true.

- Underprivileged
- Inner-city
- Urban
- At-risk
- Troubled
- Ghetto
- Gang-affected
- Dangerous
- Vulnerable

"It bugs me when people use code words like 'urban' or 'underserved' when what they mean is black and/or latinx, people of color, and/or low-income/poor."

"[You] can't assume I'm 'high-risk' if you don't know me."

💡 Words and phrases that depend on context, tone, and nuance

The meaning of words often depends on context. The words below can be valuable in naming an issue, but they can also be off-putting to young people when used without care. Consider, for example, the difference between "We are committed to a diverse and inclusive workplace." and "We need a diverse person on staff."

- Articulate
- Disadvantaged
- Diverse
- Low-income
- Minority
- Under-served
- Under-resourced
- Single-parent homes

"[Being articulate] should not be a surprise."

"If I hear [diverse] in a college app this word puts me off; just a buzz word to attract people who look a certain way but often feels like there's personal motivation to use this word."

✓ Leading with asset-based language

Emphasizing what's missing in our communities can feed stereotypes and limit creativity, even when the speaker has good intentions. Reorienting language around assets challenges us to consider the capabilities and contributions of young people as they choose their path forward.

- Strong
- Determined
- Ambitious
- Hard-working
- Committed
- Motivated
- Creative
- Powerful
- Entrepreneurial
- Vibrant
- Inspired

"I don't want to be selected out of charity; [I] want to be selected out of skill; choose me for my skill."

> " I think it is important to always start with the assets — great families, amazing variety of cultures and countries of origin for our immigrant families, deep and powerful history of culture and community; and to then highlight challenges — and to always reference that those challenges are not the community's fault or doing but rather are the results of generations of institutional injustice." **– Bronx educator with more than ten years of experience**

What's Next

This guide is a tool to be more mindful of language—personally, professionally, and organizationally.

It can be used to inform how you approach conversations, manage employees, and evaluate diversity and inclusion initiatives. Above all, this guide challenges you to think critically about the language you choose and to remember that creating more equitable systems of work and education is not possible without deep and intentional cultural change that strengthens the ways we relate to one another.

Contact

If you have questions, feedback, or are interested in contributing to a future iteration of this language guide, please contact HERE to HERE at **info@heretohere.org.**

Mission

HERE to HERE's mission is to enhance paths to rewarding careers for young people by uniting employers, educators and community-based organizations beginning in The Bronx and New York City. Our vision is a thriving, inclusive economy, in The Bronx and elsewhere, driven by meaningful partnerships between young people and employers.

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