

Fact Sheet 4 - Language and Terminology

Language and Terminology Relating to Disability

There is preferred terminology relating to disability and disabled people, which has been adopted by the IFI. This guidance is taken from large representative organisations of disabled people such as Disabled Peoples International and British Council of Disabled People (BCODP).

Disabled people realise that there needs to be terminology relating to them in certain situations, it is empowering that they decide what that language is to be. It is not about 'being politically correct' but rather, about respecting disabled people and their wishes. What we say and how we say it can have a profound effect on how people feel about themselves.

When we use words, we need to consider the effect that language can have on the receiver. Many people dismiss or do not respect the need for guidance on language and terminology and use the excuse that 'it is always changing' to avoid taking it on board. If we continue to adopt a Social Model approach, this guidance will not change.

So it is important the EFDS OC and IFI ask you to promote preferred positive language and terminology, but not get too hung up about it. You will come across many people, disabled and non-disabled, who use language that the EFDS OC and IFI suggest avoiding. Firstly, they may not know about the Social Model or they may choose to be referred to in a particular way.

Please find some guidance below on the correct terminology to use, together with explanations:

'Disabled People' is the preferred term because it is based upon the Social Model Approach to Disability. We understand it as meaning that people are disabled by barriers they encounter in society (e.g. access problems or people's attitudes), not by their impairment. The disability is not attached to the person as suggested by the term 'people with disabilities', which reflects the Medical Model approach).

'Impairment' is the term used to describe a person's medical condition, such as 'hearing impairment'. The following terminology is preferred:

- People with visual impairments (blind if totally blind)
- People with hearing impairments (deaf if profoundly deaf)
- People with physical impairments
- People with learning difficulties
- Non-disabled people
- Mental health service users
- People with mental health issues/problems
- People with speech impairments
- People with sensory impairments or dual sensory impairments (i.e. visual and hearing impairments)

Terminology	Avoid/Use	Explanation	Preferred Terminology
the disabled	Avoid	Grouping everyone together in a disempowering way, this reflects the Medical Model.	Preferred term is disabled people.
a person with a disability	Avoid	The Medical Model perspective implies that a person's impairment or medical condition causes the disability.	Preferred term is disabled people.
the deaf	Avoid	As above with The disabled. Grouping everyone together in a disempowering way, this reflects the Medical Model.	Preferred term is people with hearing impairments.
... is handicapped	Avoid	This is outdated and is considered offensive due to connotations with begging i.e. cap in hand.	Preferred term is disabled.
... suffers from/ afflicted by	Avoid	Most disabled people are not suffering but 'have' a particular impairment. This is disempowering.	Preferred term is disabled.
Spastic	Avoid	In dictionary medical term – a form of cerebral palsy. Use in a negative way. Name calling, playground culture.	Preferred term is cerebral palsy.
has cerebral palsy/ downs syndrome/ spina bifida	Use	Preferred terms.	
she is a stroke victim	Avoid	Disabled people are neither victims nor tragic.	Preferred term – she has had a stroke.
... has learning difficulties	Use	Preferred term.	Preferred term used to be learning disabilities but as with people with disabilities reflects Medical Model and attaches the disability to the person.

... is partially sighted	Avoid	'Sighted' is based on the concept of 'normality' therefore being partially sighted is a deviation from normality.	Preferred term is people with visual impairments.
... is subnormal	Avoid	What is normal? Implies disabled people are not.	Preferred term is disabled.
... is wheelchair bound	Avoid	Implies a person spends all their time in a wheelchair and cannot get out, even that they are 'tied' to their chairs. Disabled people do not sleep in their chairs and use them to go about their everyday activities.	Preferred term is wheelchair user.
able-bodied	Avoid	Implies disabled peoples bodies are 'unable' whilst non-disabled peoples bodies are able. Medical Model perspective.	Preferred term is non-disabled.