

Special Olympics on Person-First Language

Words matter. Words can open doors to cultivate the understanding and respect that enable people with disabilities to lead fuller, more independent lives. Words also can create barriers or stereotypes that are not only demeaning to people with disabilities, but also rob them of their individuality.

The following language guidelines have been developed by experts for use by anyone writing or speaking about people with intellectual disabilities to ensure that all people are portrayed with individuality and dignity.

Appropriate Terminology

Why is language and specific terminology important? Special Olympics prefers to focus on people and their gifts and accomplishments, and to dispel negative attitudes and stereotypes.

In an ideal world, labels would not exist, but unfortunately they do and language choices can have a powerful impact on impressions and attitudes. As language has evolved, Special Olympics has updated its official terminology to use more widely accepted terminology that is more acceptable to our athletes.

- Special Olympics uses the term “intellectual disabilities.” Other terms are used around the world.
- Refer to participants in Special Olympics as “Special Olympics athletes” rather than “Special Olympians” or “Special Olympic athletes.”
- Use “people-first language.” Refer to individuals, persons or people with intellectual disabilities, rather than “intellectually disabled people” or “the intellectually disabled.”
- People have intellectual disabilities, rather than are “suffering from,” “afflicted with” or “a victim of” intellectual disabilities.
- Distinguish between adults and children with intellectual disabilities. Use adults or children, or older or younger athletes.
- A person “uses” a wheelchair, rather than is “confined” or “restricted to” a wheelchair.
- “Down syndrome” has replaced “Down’s Syndrome” and “mongoloid.”
- Refer to participants in Special Olympics as athletes. In no case should the word athletes appear in quotation marks.
- When writing, refer to persons with a disability in the same style as persons without a disability: full name on first reference and last name on subsequent references. Do not refer to an individual with an intellectual disability as “Bill” rather than the journalistically correct “Bill Smith” or “Smith.”
- A person is physically challenged or disabled rather than crippled.
- Use the words “Special Olympics” when referring to the worldwide Special Olympics movement.

Terminology to Avoid

- Do not use the label “kids” when referring to Special Olympics athletes. Adult athletes are an integral part of the Movement.
- Do not preface Special Olympics with the word “the.” This implies that Special Olympics is a one-time, singular event rather than a year-round, ongoing program of sports training and competition.
- Do not use the adjective “unfortunate” when talking about people with intellectual disabilities. Disabling conditions do not have to be life-defining in a negative way.
- Do not sensationalize the accomplishments of persons with disabilities. While these accomplishments should be recognized and applauded, people in the disability rights movement have tried to make the public aware of the negative impact of referring to the achievements of people with physical or intellectual disabilities with excessive hyperbole.
- Use the word “special” with extreme care when talking about persons with intellectual disabilities. The term, if used excessively in references to Special Olympics athletes and activities, can become a cliché.

Why did Special Olympics update its terminology from “mental retardation” to “intellectual disabilities”? In response to a call from our athletes and the growing social unacceptability of the term “mental retardation” around the world, Special Olympics has adopted the term “intellectual disabilities” when referring to the people with whom we serve. The word “mental” can be confused with the term “mental illness” and the word “retardation” is associated with offensive terms such as “retard” or “retarded.”

Picture This: Intellectual Disabilities

Television and film are two of the most influential media shaping the attitudes and behavior of society. Through these mass media outlets, Special Olympics has been able to generate further awareness for the movement but, more importantly, share with society the true abilities of people with intellectual disabilities and break down destructive stereotypes.

In 2007, Special Olympics made it a priority to challenge the entertainment industry to expand its horizons and to present characters with intellectual disabilities as fully participating members of society and as characters whose lives possess depth and complexity.

In partnership with the Entertainment Industries Council, Special Olympics held a one-day “Picture This” forum in Washington, D.C., for experts in the field of intellectual disabilities to share ideas and identify issues and priorities for writers, directors and producers from New York and Hollywood. In turn, the panel of entertainment writers, producers and directors

explained the many challenges and opportunities for depicting people with intellectual disabilities onscreen.

The ideas, experience and knowledge shared at that meeting has been captured in ["Picture This: Intellectual Disabilities"](#) a report intended to encourage the creative process within the entertainment industry and to serve as a resource for anyone who wants to find information about intellectual disabilities.

As actress and Special Olympics International Board Member Vanessa Williams said at the "Picture This" forum, the time is right for "telling people about depicting intellectual disabilities, using actors who have intellectual disabilities: It's doable. It's totally doable, and it's important to do it."

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