



Tips for Speaking with/about People with Disabilities

About 54 million Americans – one out of every five individuals – have a disability. It is our nation’s largest minority group. All genders, ages, regions, socioeconomic levels and ethnic backgrounds are represented.* Here are a few tips to follow when communicating with or about people with disabilities:

- Ask if a person is willing to disclose their disability**
- In general, refer to the person first and the disability second**
- However, if possible, ask if the person prefers identity-first language (e.g., “disabled person”) or person-first language (e.g., “a person who has a disability”)**
- A disability is not an illness or medical condition; reference it only if it is relevant to the story
- Use neutral language to avoid portraying a person as passive or limited in some way (a person who has an intellectual disability is not suffering from, afflicted with or the victim of intellectual disabilities) **
- Portray people with disabilities honestly without sensationalizing their accomplishments*
- "Down syndrome" has replaced “Down’s Syndrome”, “Down’s syndrome” and “mongoloid”***
- In formal documents, 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 intellectual disabilities as "Bill" rather than the journalistically correct "Bill Smith" or "Smith"
- Do not use the following words: “abnormal”, “special”, “special needs”, “spastic”, “retarded”, “dumb”, “deaf-mute”, “defect or defective”, “deformed or deformity”, “the disabled”, “handicapped”***
- Avoid using words that connote pity such as "unfortunate" when talking about persons with an intellectual disability. Disabling conditions do not have to be life-defining in a negative way
- Refer to people without disabilities as non-disabled, people without disabilities or typical, rather than able-bodied**
- The proper term is Alzheimer’s disease, never Alzheimer’s ***
- All autism disorders are classified under the larger autism spectrum disorder diagnosis***
- A caregiver is an individual who assists another, including a person with a disability, with his or her daily life. Refer to them as a caregiver, rather than a caretaker**

Sources:

*The Arc (www.thearc.org)

**The ADA National Network (www.adata.org)

***National Center on Disability and Journalism (www.ncdj.org)