



## **Language Guidelines**

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

### **Appropriate Terminology**

1. Always use people-first language, placing the person before the disability (e.g. person with an intellectual disability not “the intellectually disabled” or the “intellectually disabled person”).  
Examples include:
  - Person(s) with a disability, not disabled, handicapped, crippled
  - Person who has.... or Person with, not crippled by, afflicted with, suffering from, victim of, deformed
  - Person who uses a wheelchair, not confined, bound, restricted to, dependent on a wheelchair
  - Person who is deaf, hard of hearing, not deaf and dumb, deaf mute, hearing impaired
  - Person with an intellectual disability, not retarded, mentally retarded
  - Person with a physical disability, not physically challenged
  - Person with a mental illness, Person who has schizophrenia, Person who has ..., not Mental patient, mentally ill, mental, insane
  - Person with a learning disability, not learning disabled, learning difficulty
  - Persons who are visually impaired, blind, not Visually impaired people (as a collective noun)
2. Use empowering of factual language rather than language that evokes pity. A person has an intellectual disability rather than is suffering from, afflicted with, or a victim of an intellectual disability.
3. Distinguish between adults and children with an intellectual disability. Use adults or children, or older or younger athletes. Never generalize as kids.
4. Down syndrome has replaced “Down’s syndrome”.
5. Refer to participants in Special Olympics as athletes. In no case should the word appear in quotation marks. We are not licensed to use the term “Special Olympians.”
6. The words “Special Olympics” are never written without the “s” at the end of “Olympics” i.e. Special Olympics programs, Special Olympics athletes, Special Olympics Games, etc.

### **Terminology to Avoid:**

1. Refer to the person's disability only when it is relevant and necessary.
2. Do not use the label kids when referring to Special Olympics athletes. Adult athletes are an integral part of the program.
3. Do not use the adjective unfortunate when talking about persons with an intellectual disability. Disabling conditions do not have to be life defining in a negative way.
4. Do not use the word "the" in front of Special Olympics unless describing a specific Olympics event or Games.
5. Do not sensationalize the accomplishments of persons with disabilities. While these accomplishments should be recognized, beware of the negative impact in referring to the achievements of people with a physical or intellectual disability with excessive hyperbole.
6. Do not overuse the word "special" when talking about persons with an intellectual disability. The term is distancing and describes that which is different about a person. Focus on the athlete's accomplishments and goals.