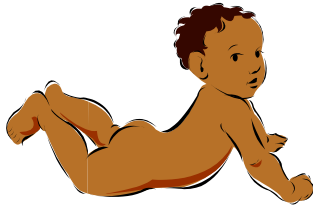


## Helping Others Understand

### **People want to support you, yet they may not know what to say.**

Language, the words people use and the way they say those words, can be comforting or very irritating. Help your family and friends to express their questions and support in ways that show an understanding of your views.



### **People First Language focuses on the person first, the disability last.**

This way of discussing a person describes the person first and the disability last. It describes what the child has, not what the child is. Here are some examples:

- baby with a congenital disability.
- a child with autism.
- my niece has a mental disability.
- my son has a hearing impairment.
- my daughter has a developmental delay.

People do not "suffer from," "are not afflicted with," or a "victim of" anything.

### **A disability is only one characteristic of a person who can be described by many other words.**

Help people understand that it is not appropriate to describe your child with a label. Describe your child with the characteristics that you enjoy and appreciate.

Here is a letter a mother sent to her family as part of her effort for National Autism Awareness Week, educating them about People First Language and her child.

*...Lorraine is a beautiful four and a half year old girl, with thick dark hair, deep blue eyes who loves music and nursery rhymes, is great at her computer, loves to swim and thinks Winnie the Pooh and Tigger too are the funniest characters alive, gets excited riding on the freeway, and like her Pop Pop, loves to eat cake.*

*Lorraine also has autism. Lorraine is not autistic. She is much more than that.*

*Before People First Language, I couldn't sort out exactly why I always squirmed inside when I told people Lorraine was autistic... I can't count the number of times I've heard myself say, "Some specialists think she is autistic." Denial was working with me here because until the very recent past, I used to think, "Tell me anything but that." ... To me,*

*saying someone is autistic is suggesting they are someone to be observed and curious about rather than someone to talk to, play with and enjoy.*

*...I give you this information so you'll have a better understanding of autism. ...I asked one of Lorraine's therapists why Lorraine got so upset or fell asleep when a crowd of any size gathered. She told me that Lorraine's nervous system couldn't filter all the input. She could not organize it or make sense of it. Unlike her mother, who loves a crowd, Lorraine has had to develop coping skills to deal with her large extended family. Lorraine is handling the packs and gangs that her family travels in much better. We are encouraged because we see more eye contact and she seems to be letting more in.*

*You may be thinking, "but man, it's really hard to get in with Lorraine." We think so too. But please don't stop trying. We appreciate it every time you say hello and get no response. Lorraine seems to live in her own happy bubble. We need to keep pulling her into our world. We know she is with us when we are singing to her. And we are singing fools around here. But there is so much we need to teach her and we need to find other ways to reach her. Let's see.....singing songs, in the pool with Winnie the Pooh...*

You can find *Great Beginnings* on the web at <http://ag.udel.edu/extension/fam/gb/gb-list.htm>

This article is based on an idea from Elizabeth O'Neill, Family Support Coordinator, Part H Birth to Three Program. Some material was adapted from an article by Kathie Snow, a parent of a child with cerebral palsy and parent trainer. She may be reached at 250 Sunnywood Lane, Woodland Park, Colorado 80863.

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