

ARTS FOR ALL: GUIDELINES

What words to use

How we refer to people is incredibly important. Language, and what's appropriate, is constantly evolving and so it's important to be aware of current terms. Notice the words that Deaf and disabled people use to describe themselves and their communities. You may not always get it right but your desire to be respectful and responsive will go a long way.

Avoid euphemisms and don't be afraid to ask questions about someone's preferences. Just remember that every person is an individual.

Two ways to refer to disability

Two views about disability, common in New Zealand and internationally, are the "person-first" approach (e.g. person with a disability) and the "social model" (e.g. disabled person). Both believe that society disables people through the physical and social barriers it presents.

Many Deaf people don't identify as disabled. The term "Deaf" (with a capital D) refers more to a Deaf culture and belonging to a community rather than to their hearing status. They may say deaf when referring to diagnoses or hearing loss.

Person-first language

Language that focuses on individuals and not a disability is known as person-first language. It affirms the individual and does not define people by their physical impairments. This is about describing disabled people in a way that values them for who they are, rather than identifying them by what they cannot do. People with learning disability/disabilities is the preferred language of that community.

Okay: person with a disability, person with disabilities, people with disabilities

Not okay: crippled, handicapped, suffers from/afflicted with disability, wheelchair bound

Social model

The New Zealand Disability Strategy and the Office for Disability Issues use the term "disabled people" – people who have been disabled by society. Many disabled people see their disability as an important and positive part of their identity. "Disabled person", therefore, can be a political statement.

Okay: disabled people, disabled communities or disability communities, disability sector (when referring to service providers and the wider context as well as disabled communities), disability perspective



Arts For All is an Arts Access Aotearoa-Creative New Zealand partnership programme. The aim of this programme is to encourage arts organisations, venues and producers to improve their access to Deaf and disabled audiences. Download the guide at artsaccess.org.nz or call 04 802 4349 for more information.

Be aware and be flexible

Some people see person-first terminology as devaluing an important part of their identity. There is no consensus on terms and so it's good to be flexible and transparent about the language you use and why. If someone tells you they prefer being referred to as "Deaf" and not "person who is Deaf", respect this choice but don't assume it's the same for everyone. Avoid grading the level of disability or impairment a person has: e.g. severely disabled.

Ask for advice if you're not sure what language to use. Asking questions shows you're prepared to learn and are aware of individual experiences.

What's okay/not okay

Here's a list of currently acceptable language, gathered from a range of sources.

Okay: disabled person/people/community, disability sector, disability organisation

Not okay: the disabled, handicapped, invalid, abnormal, special/special needs, cripple, deformed, defective

Okay: non-disabled people

Not okay: normal, able-bodied, typical, healthy

Okay: mobility impaired person, physically impaired or physically disabled person

Not okay: cripple, handicapped (some disabled people have reclaimed the word "cripple" but it's their decision to refer to themselves that way. If you are not physically disabled don't use it).

Okay: accessible toilet/parking space

Not okay: disabled toilet/parking spaces (the space or toilet can't be disabled)

Okay: the person has ... (the impairment)

Not okay: afflicted with, suffers from, victim of

Okay: blind person/people, vision impaired person, partially sighted person, person with low vision

Not okay: the blind

Okay: Deaf person/people, person who is hard of hearing

Not okay: the deaf, deaf and dumb, deaf mute, hearing impaired

Okay: the person uses a wheelchair, wheelchair user

Not okay: wheelchair confined/bound, quadriplegic

Okay: person with mental health distress, mental health consumer, mental health service user

Not okay: schizo, crazy, patient, mentally ill, mental case, disturbed, psycho

Okay: impairment

Not okay: disease, birth defect, affliction, handicap

Okay: person with intellectual disabilities/learning disability
Not okay: simple, spastic, retarded, feeble-minded, handicapped

Okay: person has Down syndrome
Not okay: Mongol, Downs, is Down Syndrome

Support workers

It's important to use the language preferred by disabled people when referring to their support people. Remember that not all disabled people will have a support worker or companion with them but for those who do make sure you direct any questions to the disabled person and not their support worker or companion.

Some people may bring a friend or partner to an event to support them so be mindful of assuming. It's awkward for everyone if you mistake someone's partner for their support worker.

Okay: Support worker, support person, personal assistant, companion
Not okay: carer, caregiver, guardian

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