



Volunteer Guide - Teen Pals Program

What is People First Language?

People first language is important to know when speaking to and about people with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD). People first language recognizes that we are all people first and emphasizes each person's value, individuality, dignity, and capabilities.

In general, refer to the person first, not the disability. A person with an IDD should not be described as a “disabled person,” but rather a “person with an intellectual and/or developmental disability.” This way, the emphasis is placed on the person, not the disability.

Examples of People First Language:

Say:

People with disabilities
He has an intellectual disability
She has autism (or an autism diagnosis)
He has a diagnosis of Down syndrome
She has a learning disability (diagnosis)
He has a physical disability (diagnosis)
She's of short stature/she's a little person
He has a mental health diagnosis
She uses a wheelchair/mobility chair
He receives special education services
Kids without disabilities
Communicates with her eyes/device/etc.
Congenital disability / Brain injury
Accessible parking/hotel room/etc.

Instead of:

Disabled people
He is mentally retarded
She's autistic
He's Down's
She's learning disabled
He's a quadriplegic/crippled
She's a dwarf/midget
He's mentally ill
She's wheelchair bound
He's in special education
Normal or healthy kids
Is mute or non-verbal
Birth defect or Brain damaged
Handicapped parking/hotel

Volunteer Tips

- Remember that a person who has a disability (your Pal) is a person—just like you!
- Your Pal relationship should be like any other relationship, a reciprocal one.
- Relax. If you don't know what to do or say, allow your Pal to take the lead.
- Discuss and explore your mutual interests in a friendly way. Your Pal probably has many interests besides those connected with their disability.
- It's ok to talk about disability if it comes up naturally. Be sensitive to your Pal's wishes if they do not want to talk about their disability.
- Offer assistance tactfully if it seems needed but do not overdo it, insist on helping, or make a scene. Respect a person's right to reject the help or say what kind of help they need.
- If you cannot help in the way that is asked, discuss it with your Pal. You have a right to set limits on what you can and cannot do.
- Recognize what your Pal can do and their unique strengths and abilities. Keep in mind that difficulties your Pal may be facing may stem more from society's attitudes and barriers than from the disability itself.
- Be considerate of the extra time it might take for your Pal to get things said or done. Let your Pal set the pace of the conversation or activity.
- Speak directly to your Pal, even if they use an interpreter or device to communicate.
- Give your whole, unhurried attention to your Pal if they have difficulty speaking. Do not talk for them; but give help when needed. Keep your manner encouraging rather than correcting. When necessary, ask questions that require short answers or a shake/nod of the head.
- Do not pretend to understand a person with a speech difference when you do not understand them. Politely let your Pal know if you cannot understand what they said. Offer ideas you think may help with communication and discuss it.
- Speak calmly, slowly, and distinctly to a person who has a hearing impairment. Stand in front of your Pal, speak directly to them and use natural gestures to aid in communication. When full understanding is doubtful, try other forms of communication like writing notes.
- If your Pal has a wheelchair, crutches, or other mobility aids, treat them as an extension of their body. Do not touch, lean on, or move a person's mobility aids without their permission. You may offer to help your Pal with their mobility; but never move them without their permission. Keep your own physical limitations in mind before offering to help.

Remember the “Golden Rule” treat others as you want to be treated!

Conversation Starters

- Talk about 3 things you love to do.
- What is 1 place you'd like to visit?
- What is 1 thing you would like to learn how to do?
- Share a hobby or talent you have. Share examples of your hobby or talent.
- Do you have a favorite sport or team?
- What was the last movie or TV show you watched?
- What is the nicest thing a friend has done for you?

Topics to Discuss

- Hobbies
- Vacations / Destinations you'd like to go
- Food / Cooking / Restaurants
- Your culture / heritage / background
- Family - mom, dad, brother, sister, aunts, uncles
- The last book you read or want to read because . . .
- Your favorite TV or movie series