

Language Guidelines

Words matter because people matter and people bring meaning to words. What we say and the language we use matters.

Person first terminology demonstrates respect for the individual first. Positive words promote positive images, just like negative words create negative images. The following language guidelines have been developed for use by anyone writing or speaking about persons with disabilities, to ensure that all people are portrayed with individuality and dignity.

THE DO's

Intellectual disability is an adjective, and is just one of many that might be used to describe someone.

EMPHASIZE THE PERSON NOT THE DISABILITY.

DO use the preferred language:

- A person with an intellectual disability;
- Individuals, persons, or people with intellectual disabilities;
- John Public, who has an intellectual disability;
- Families of persons with intellectual disabilities.

REMEMBER TO ALWAYS USE PERSON FIRST TERMINOLOGY.

DO distinguish between adults and children with an intellectual disability. Use adults or children, or older or younger athletes.

DO refer to participants in Special Olympics as athletes. In no case should the word appear in quotation marks.



When writing or when speaking about a person, DO refer to persons with disabilities in the same style as persons without them: full name on first reference and last name on subsequent references. Avoid the reference to an individual with Down syndrome as “Bill”, and use the journalistically correct “Bill Smith”. Avoid the use of childlike terms or nicknames unless you have received permission by the individual to do so.

DO use the following correct terminology:

- A person has an intellectual disability, rather than is suffering from, afflicted with, or a victim of intellectual retardation;
- A person has Down syndrome (Note the correct and singular term ‘Down syndrome’ instead of “Down’s syndrome”, never use the term “Down’s” or “mongoloid” (or mongoloidism);
- A person has a learning disability, and is not a learning disabled person;
- A person may use a wheelchair, rather than confined or restricted to a wheelchair;
- A person has a physical disability, and is not a physically challenged person;
- A person is visually impaired or blind; rather than a sight impaired person;
- A person is hearing impaired or deaf; rather than a hearing impaired or deaf person. (The term deaf mute is used when an individual is deaf and does not speak verbally)
- A person has a seizure disorder or epilepsy; rather than is an epileptic; a person has a seizure rather than a fit.

DO use the correct term when describing Special Olympics Ontario and the use of the acronym SOO versus the past use of Ontario Special Olympics (OSO). Describe communities as Special Olympics Ontario – community-xxx, versus xxx-community Special Olympics.

DO use the words “Special Olympics Ontario Provincial Office” rather than the term “Head Office” when referring to the Provincial Administration to describe the Provincial office in Toronto.



THE DO NOT's

DO NOT preface Special Olympics with the word “the”. This implies that Special Olympics is a one-time, singular event, rather than an ongoing sports training program.

DO NOT use the word “kids” when referring to Special Olympics athletes. Adult athletes are an integral part of the program.

DO NOT use the adjective “unfortunate” when talking about persons with an intellectual disability.

DO NOT sensationalize the accomplishments of people with an intellectual disability as heroic or brave. While these accomplishments should be recognized and applauded, disability rights advocates encourage all individuals to avoid referring to achievements in ways, which reinforce and perpetuate the stigma of disability.

If you have any thoughts or questions on these guidelines please contact your community coordinator or any staff member at the provincial office.

