

Preferred Language Guide

Use the preferred language when referring to Down syndrome and people who have Down syndrome. People-First Language emphasizes the person, not the disability. By placing the person first, the disability is no longer the primary, defining characteristic of an individual, but one of several aspects of the whole person. The words that we use and the words that we hear shape the world around us and our experience in it. When communicating about Down syndrome and people with Down syndrome, language provides us with an opportunity to advocate.

Language Counts – Your Words Matter

- People with Down syndrome should always be referred to as people first.
- The correct name of the diagnosis is Down syndrome. Avoid referring to the condition as “Down’s” or “Downs.” Down syndrome is named for the English physician John Langdon Down, who characterized the condition, but did not have it. The “apostrophe s” implies ownership or possession. In Down syndrome, the “S in syndrome” is not capitalized. The AP stylebook recommends using “Down syndrome”.
- Instead of “a Down syndrome child”, please use “a child with Down syndrome”.
- Avoid using “Down’s child/adult” when describing the condition as “Down’s” as in, “He has Down’s.” Preferred language would be “child with Down syndrome” or “adult with Down syndrome.”
- Words can create barriers; try to recognize that a child is “a child with Down syndrome” and that an adult “is an adult with Down syndrome.” Children become adults, and individuals with Down syndrome are not “eternal children.”
- Down syndrome is a condition or a syndrome, not a disease. Having Down syndrome does not mean that an individual is sick.
- People “have” Down syndrome, they do not “suffer from” it, and are not “afflicted by” it.
- “Typically developing” or “typical” is preferred over “normal”.
- “Intellectual disability”, “developmental disability” or “cognitive disability” has replaced “mental retardation” as the appropriate terminology.
- A person either has Down syndrome or they do not. Individuals do not have “mild or severe” Down syndrome.
- DSNetwork strongly condemns the use of the word “retarded” in any derogatory context. Using this word is hurtful and suggests that people with disabilities are not competent.

Each person with Down syndrome has his/her own unique strengths, capabilities, and talents. Try not to use clichés that are common when describing an individual with Down syndrome. To assume that all people have the same characteristics or abilities is degrading. People with Down syndrome are individuals – they are our children, siblings, students and friends. Proudly acknowledge their individuality and their accomplishments.