

Cerebral Palsy

A Guide to Disability Language



Inclusion Starts with Language

The language we use in school settings matters. It shapes how pupils understand disability, how included disabled children feel and how confident staff are in talking about difference.

Language evolves

The language surrounding disability is constantly changing as society learns and as the voices of disabled people are heard. Words and phrases which were once common may no longer feel respectful or accurate – and that's OK. Staying open to learning is part of inclusive practice.

Focus on the person, not assumptions

Terms such as “disabled person” or “person with a disability” are widely used today because they recognise people as individuals first, not defined by a diagnosis. Person-centred language supports dignity and avoids reducing a child to their impairment.

There is no single “correct” approach – respect preferences

Within the disabled community, there is healthy debate about language. For example, many autistic people prefer identity first language – “autistic person”. This is because autism is a core part of who they are, not something separate from them. This reminds us that disability often arises from barriers in society, not from the individual.

Be mindful of reclaimed language

Some disabled adults and young people may use terms about themselves that would not be appropriate for others to use. This is known as reclaiming language and can be a way of taking back power from words that were once used in a negative way. In school settings, it's important that staff model respectful language and explain context where needed.

Respectful, not perfect

It's OK to make mistakes. If you're unsure, ask the individual privately and respectfully about their preferences. Listen and be guided by the pupil and their family. Modelling this openness teaches pupils that inclusion is about learning, not fear of getting it wrong.

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How to explain this to pupils

When talking to pupils about disability language, keep it simple and age-appropriate. You might explain that words and language matter because they can have a big impact on how people feel about themselves. You should empathise that language should always be kind and respectful.

Let pupils know that language is continually changing, particularly as we learn and that it's OK to be unsure about things. Some disabled people have preferences about words to describe themselves and we should follow their lead.

Remind pupils that it's OK to get things wrong – we say sorry, correct it and move on because learning is part of being kind.

What to say if a pupil uses unkind language

If a pupil uses unkind or inappropriate language about disability, respond calmly and address it straight away. Name the issue without shaming — for example, “That word can be hurtful, and we don't use it in our classroom.” Briefly explain why the language isn't appropriate, then model an alternative word or phrase.

If the comment comes from curiosity rather than intent to harm, treat it as a learning moment. If it is repeated or deliberate, follow your school's behaviour policy and reinforce expectations around respect. Importantly, avoid making disabled pupils responsible for educating others, and check in with any pupil who may have been affected.

Appropriate Language

These are examples of language which is generally accepted and welcomed by the disabled community:

- Wheelchair user
- Person with . . .
- Visual impairments
- Seizures
- Non-disabled
- Accessible
- The Deaf Community
- Support worker
- Access needs

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Language to avoid

These are examples of language which should be avoided when talking about disability:

- Handicapped
- Sufferer
- Victim
- “Normal”
- Brave / Special
- Wheelchair Bound
- Crippled
- Deaf / Dumb
- Invalid
- Spastic
- The Disabled
- Fits
- Caregiver

Further support

If you would like support with disability awareness, inclusive practice or delivering age-appropriate conversations about Cerebral Palsy and disability, I offer assemblies, staff training and consultancy informed by lived experience.

Remember – you don’t need to have the answer to every question but by being open and honest and willing to learn models inclusion better than getting everything right!

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