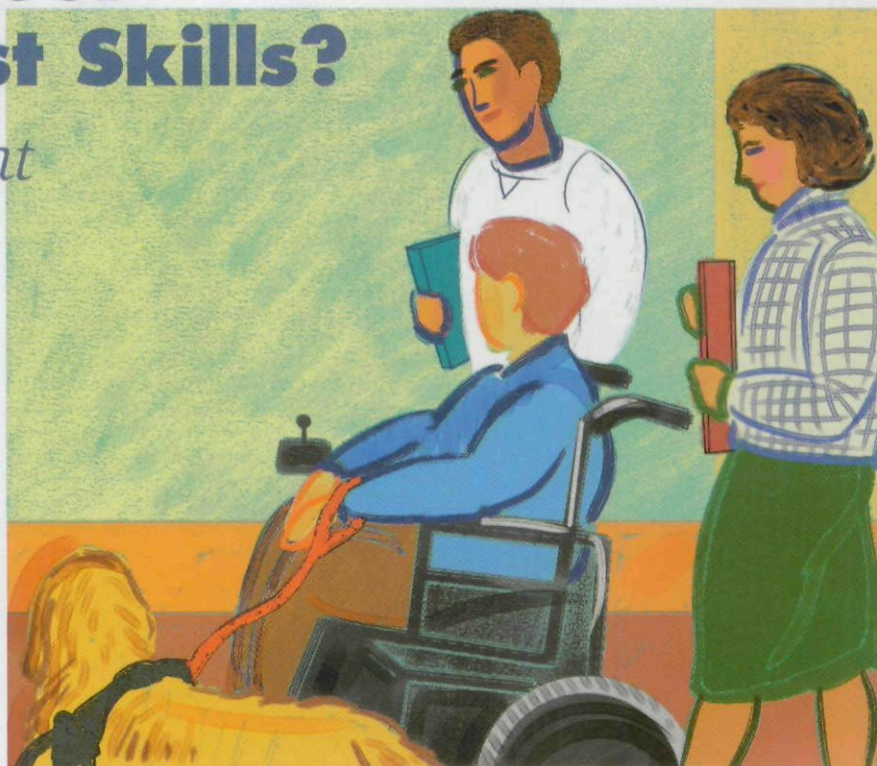


How Are Your Person First Skills?

A Self-Assessment

Carol L. Russell



You may say that you have heard it all before, and you know everything about the person first philosophy. Yet have you really assessed yourself on how you use it? There is daily evidence on the news and in newspapers, magazines, movies, textbooks, classrooms, and medical, educational, and social services fields that many people do not actively use, know, or understand this philosophy. Whereas some people simply need to master using person first, others have not even heard of it. Hopefully as a general or special education professional, you believe in and support the person first philosophy. But do your words and actions consistently reflect your beliefs?

This article reviews what the person first philosophy is, explains why you should use it, provides a self-assessment for how you use it, and offers suggestions and resources to support and advocate the person first philosophy.

What Is Person First?

When you see someone in a wheelchair, what do you see first: the wheelchair, the physical disability, or the person? Do you find yourself using phrases such as

wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair, handicapped, or even terms such as blind as a bat or crippled? If so, you may need to review and make a conscious effort to use the person first philosophy.

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rather than the disability. For example, when using person first, use the term *children with disabilities* versus *disabled children*. Someone is not a disability who happens to be a person but rather a person who happens to have a disability. Calling someone a disabled person focuses on one's differences because of that disability. Some examples of the person first philosophy include:

- ✓ Refer to the person first and then the disability.
- ✓ Emphasize abilities not disabilities or limitations.
- ✓ Use the term people with disabilities rather than label people as part of a disability group such as the disabled.
- ✓ Do not patronize or give excessive praise or attention to a person with a disability.

- ✓ Give people with a disability choice and independence (e.g., having as many options as appropriate including what to eat, wear, and do) and allow individuals to speak for themselves rather than have someone speak for them.

Disability Versus Handicap

The term *disability* refers to a functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability such as walking, hearing, talking, and learning. The term *handicap* refers to a situation or barrier that society and the environment imposes by not making environments accessible. For example, society handicaps a person by not providing curb cuts for wheelchairs, Braille signage for the visually impaired, or building ramps or elevator accessibility for people who need it. See Figure 1 for examples of person first and non-person first language.

According to Snow (2005):

"Handicapped" is an archaic term—it's no longer used in any federal legislation—that evokes negative images (pity, fear, and more). The origin of the word is from an Old English bartering game, in which the loser was left with his "hand in his cap" and was thought to be at a disadvantage. A legendary origin of the "H-word" refers to a person with a disability begging with his "cap in his hand." This antiquated, derogatory term perpetuates the stereotypical perception that people with disability diagnoses make up one homogenous group of pitiful, needy people! (Inaccurate Descriptors section, ¶1)

Why Use Person First?

Person first philosophy displayed through language and actions is a matter of respect for a person with special needs. Your attitude and respect for others is reflected in what you do and say through the person first philosophy. According to Snow (2005):

Words are powerful. Old and inaccurate descriptors, and the inappropriate use of these descriptors, perpetuate negative stereotypes and reinforce an

incredibly powerful attitudinal barrier. And this invisible, but potent, attitudinal barrier is the greatest obstacle facing individuals who have disability diagnoses. When we describe people by their medical diagnoses, we devalue and disrespect them as individuals. Do you want to be known primarily by your psoriasis, gynecological history, the warts on your behind, or any other condition? (The Power of Language and Labels section, ¶1)

How would you introduce someone who does not have a disability? You would most likely introduce a person by giving his name, where he lives, what he does, or his hobbies such as swimming, riding horses, eating Mexican food, or cooking. People do not want to be identified only by one's characteristics such as one's ability to play tennis, loving to eat onion rings, or the freckles or mole on one's face. So why would you introduce a person who has a disability any differently? For example, if you were to introduce someone by first indicating or emphasizing the disability, you are not seeing the person first. A person's disability will undoubtedly come up in conversation at some point, but it does not need to be during introductions. Each of us has mental and physical characteristics making us unique from each other. People with disabilities are like everyone else; they

just happen to have a disability and may need accommodations.

Emphasize abilities not disabilities or limitations.

The person first philosophy has been around for many years and is becoming more prevalent in our society. For example, (a) federal laws from 1990 reworded a special education law, Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and a civil rights law, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), to be in person first language; (b) special education journals have started requiring person first language within articles; (c) some text publishers require person first; and (d) a Google.com search of person first language produced 25,300,000 sites referencing it. Although it is becoming more commonly used, many people struggle to use it and some people ignore the importance of using it.

How Are Your Person First Skills?

Use the informal quiz in Figure 2 to assess your person first skill level using the given scale to rate each statement accurately. Remember that if any part of the statement is true it affects the entire answer and you should score yourself accordingly. When you are finished with

Figure 1. Terminology Examples

| Person First Terminology | Non-Person First Terminology |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Child with a disability | Disabled or handicapped child |
| Person who is deaf or hard of hearing | Deaf and dumb |
| Person with mental retardation | Retarded |
| Person who uses a wheelchair | Confined to a wheelchair or wheelchair bound |
| Child who has a congenital disability | Birth defect |
| Person of short stature | Dwarf or midget |
| Uses a wheelchair | Confined to a wheelchair or wheelchair bound |
| Has paraplegia/quadruplegia | Paraplegic/Quadruplegic |
| Accessible parking | Handicapped parking |
| Accessible bathroom | Handicapped bathroom |

Note. Adapted from *When Speaking and Writing, Put the Person First Then the Disability* (Brochure) by Author, n.d. Courage Center, Golden Valley, MN.

Figure 2. A Self-Assessment for Using Person First

Rate yourself according to following scale. How often do you do the following?

1 = always; 2 = often; 3 = sometimes; 4 = almost never; 5 = never

1. _____ Push a person's wheelchair without asking first.
2. _____ Use the terms *disabled* or *disabled person* rather than *person with a disability*.
3. _____ Write *disabled* or *disabled person* rather than *person with a disability*.
4. _____ Use the terms *handicapped*, *person with a handicap*, *handicapped bathroom*, or *handicapped parking*.
5. _____ Refer to a person who uses a wheelchair as *confined to a wheelchair* or *wheelchair bound*.
6. _____ Use the term *normal person* versus *person without a disability*.
7. _____ Use terms such as *victim* (e.g., stroke victim), *stricken with XYZ*, *suffers from XYZ*, *crippled*, or *mute*.
8. _____ Use the term *birth defect* when referring to a person who has had a disability since birth.
9. _____ Remain standing when talking to a person who uses a wheelchair.
10. _____ Ignore a person with a speech delay if you cannot understand what that person is saying.
11. _____ Use the term *autistic child* or *autistic student*.
12. _____ Use the term *arthritic* or *cerebral palsied*.
13. _____ Use the term *paraplegic* or *quadriplegic*.
14. _____ Use terms such as *retarded* or *idiot*.
15. _____ Ignore non-person first language when others use it in conversation.
16. _____ Ignore non-person first language when you read it.

TOTAL _____

With your total score, use this informal key to determine your level of expertise regarding person first.

- 0-15 = You need improvement.
- 16-30 = You're learning!
- 31-45 = You're on your way!
- 46-60 = You're a conscientious user!
- 61-75 = You're an expert!

the assessment, match your total score to your level of person first mastery.

Perhaps you have mastered or almost mastered this philosophy; that is great! You are a role model and likely an advocate for person first. Perhaps you are doing fairly well with using person first philosophy, but you need to make an effort to use it more consistently and advocate for its use when you hear or read non-person first language. If you noticed from your self-assessment that

you need to work on using person first, consider using a buddy system with a fellow professional. Find strategies to help each other use person first such as putting a penny in a jar for not using it properly.

How Can You Change?

When you put the person first philosophy into practice by making a conscious effort in your own speech and language, it is easier to notice when it is not used

properly by yourself and others. Once you are comfortable with using it, advocate for the use of person first by sharing and educating others regarding the philosophy. There are many opportunities to advocate this philosophy in the classroom, in the media, and with your families. Modeling how to use person first language and actions, as well as directly educating others, is the most effective strategy to help change those who do not use or do not know about this philosophy.

The Courage Center's brochure *When Meeting, Put the Person First Then the Disability* (n.d.) offers suggestions regarding person first actions when meeting a person with disabilities including:

- ✓ Be yourself. Treat a person with a disability as you would anyone who does not have a disability.
- ✓ Respect a person with a disability enough to let you know the kind of help needed.
- ✓ Talk directly to a person with disabilities, not the person with him. If the person is in a wheelchair, put yourself at eye level.
- ✓ If a person has a speech problem and you have trouble understanding what is said, ask that person to repeat himself, ask someone to help you understand what is said, or ask the person to write it down for you.
- ✓ If a person is deaf and there is no interpreter, use a normal voice tone when speaking. It may be helpful to slow down your speaking if that person lip reads, write down what you are saying, or learn sign language to help you communicate.
- ✓ If a person has a helper dog with its harness on, do not pet the dog since it is working and cannot play.
- ✓ Be considerate and patient with others if it takes extra time for a person to move or talk.
- ✓ Never start to push a person's wheelchair without asking first and allow that person to tell you how to help with nonaccessible areas.
- ✓ Remember that people with disabilities have many interests other

than those associated with one's disability.

Advocate for the use of person first by sharing and educating others regarding the philosophy.

The Courage Center's brochure *When Speaking and Writing, Put the Person First Then the Disability* (n.d.) gives examples of how to use person first language including:

- ✓ Always put the person first and then the disability. Say or write *person with a disability* rather than disabled person.
- ✓ Use the term *disability* to describe a functional limitation that gets in the way of a person's ability to walk, hear, see, talk, or learn. Use the term *handicap* to describe a situation or barrier imposed by society, the environment, or oneself.
- ✓ Do not be concerned if you use words such as *see* with a person who is blind, *hear* with a person who is deaf, or *walk* with a person who uses a wheelchair. These words do not offend.
- ✓ Use the term *person who uses a wheelchair* instead of *confined to a wheelchair*.
- ✓ Use the terms *non-disabled* or *one who does not have similar challenges* instead of the term *normal person* when comparing to a person with a disability.
- ✓ Use terms such as *person who has had a stroke* instead of terms such as *victim, stricken, crippled, or mute*.
- ✓ Use the term *person who has had a disability since birth* instead of *birth defect*.

Additional suggestions for advocating person first include:

- ✓ As an educator, consider person first language as a requirement for students' writing.

- ✓ Share information with others to increase person first awareness such as informative brochures similar to ones from Courage Center.
- ✓ Deal directly with non-person first language and attitudes since ignoring it communicates that it is okay to misuse it.

Another great resource for learning about this philosophy is the video, *People First* (Burnstein & Dunn, 1996) available from the Courage Center. This video, appropriate for all ages, introduces this philosophy as well as addresses labeling, friendships, feelings, fears, and assistive technology available to people with special needs.

Moyer's (1995) CD, *We're People First: Songs for Inclusive Schools and Communities*, is another person first resource using music and activities appropriate for all ages. Moyer offers a powerful combination of resources focused around activities and original songs used around the world in schools, homes, and special education programs. The CD and activity book are great for music and general education teachers, parents, music therapists, or group leaders. There is also an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) edition available which is a computer disk containing files for singing voices (male or female) using AAC systems. Moyer was the first to use this system with a singing voice to allow children, who could not otherwise participate in song, to be included in these music activities. See <http://www.jeffmoyer.com/prod01.htm> for further information.

Conclusion

According to Snow (2005):

People [f]irst [l]anguage was created by individuals who said, "We are not our disabilities." It's not about "political correctness," but good manners and respect. Some reject [p]eople [f]irst [l]anguage, saying it's unimportant; others say they prefer descriptors like "special needs." But the feelings and preferences of people without disabilities are irrelevant. What is relevant? The feelings of the people we're talking about and the perceptions of

them which we create with our words! We can create a new paradigm of disability. In the process, we'll change ourselves and our world—as well as the lives of millions of children and adults. (Using People First Language is Crucial! section, ¶10)

Educators, parents, administrators, and related service professionals have a responsibility to reflect a person first philosophy, to use language of respect regarding children and adults with special needs, and to model this for others. Let your language reflect your philosophy. Share person first with others!

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