People First Language Puts Emphasis on People, First | CPD

Sue Reeves
10/18/2013

Words have power. Words can shape attitudes and inform our reactions to the world around us.

People First language is a way of using words that describe people first, instead of their disabilities. It can change the way we see a person, and it can change the way that person sees her or himself.

“It’s a matter of respect and dignity for all individuals, not just individuals with a disability,” said Gordon Richins, Consumer Liaison at Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities. “People are people first, regardless of their walk of life. Plumbers are plumbers, truck drivers are truck drivers, people with disabilities are mothers, fathers, neighbors, etc.”

Richins uses a wheelchair for mobility after a farming accident left him with quadriplegia. He is not ‘wheelchair bound.’ He is not ‘confined’ to a wheelchair.

“Disability is a natural part of the human experience,” Richins said. “It’s going to happen to all of us if we live long enough.”

According to DisabilityIsNatural.com, a disability is a medical diagnosis. It is not a measure of a person’s abilities or potential. Why is it, then, that people still use phrases like “crippled woman” or “autistic child?”

Mark Twain said, “The difference between the right word and the ‘almost’ right word is the difference between lighting and the lightning bug.”

People First Language puts the person first, before the disability: “Woman who has a physical disability.” “Child on the autism spectrum.”

Words have power. Words can shape attitudes and inform our reactions to the world around us. It takes a conscious effort to choose People First Language in the way we refer to all people, not just people with disabilities.

“At my age, I grew up at a time in history when individuals with disability were identified with derogatory words and ridicule,” Richins said. “Now at age 57 and a member of the disability community, I still think of memories from grade school and junior high where People First Language would have made a great deal of difference in how individuals with disability were ridiculed and treated in society.”

For more People First Language resources, visit:

Wyoming UCEDD for children’s coloring books featuring People First Language

Disability is Natural for printable charts and documents

Share This Story