



**NCSS**  
National Council  
of Social Service

# Inclusive Language Guide



A guide to promote respectful, empathetic  
and inclusive communication

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## About This Guide

Communication is a fundamental aspect of our daily lives, the words we choose and the language we use have the power to uplift, connect, and empower individuals from all walks of life.

This Inclusive Language Guide has been crafted to promote respectful, empathetic, and inclusive communication when engaging with and discussing individuals facing diverse challenges.

By understanding and implementing the principles of inclusive language, we can foster a more compassionate and equitable society where every voice is heard, and every individual is respected for who they are.



# Language to use or avoid when interacting in written or verbal communication about/with Persons on Autism Spectrum



## Appropriate Language

- Person with autism
- Person on the autism spectrum
- Person who has been diagnosed with autism



## Inappropriate Language

- Physically or mentally disabled learner
- Autism Spectrum Disorder (best kept for academic usage)
- Disabled

### Never say or do this:

You seem so normal!  
You don't look autistic.

You must be like Rainman.

You must be obsessed with something!

You are so inspiring!\*

Don't worry, everyone is a little autistic.

Do you take medication?

I also have social issues. Does it mean I also have autism?

\* This is a type of *inspiration porn* and can be viewed as offensive or patronizing. The term *inspiration porn* was coined and made popular by disability activist, Stella Young.



## Tip

Instead of using the term "an autistic child," you can use "a child with autism." This phrasing places the child first (person-first), and their autism as a characteristic rather than their defining identity.



# Language to use or avoid when interacting in written or verbal communication about/with **Persons with Mental Health Conditions**



## Appropriate Language

- **Persons with mental health conditions**
- **Living with mental health condition**
- **Persons in recovery\***
- **Persons with lived experience\***
- **Died/ lost by suicide/ took her or his own life**

\* These 2 terms can also be used when the audience is aware that you are speaking in the context of mental health



## Inappropriate Language

- **Mad**
- **Crazy**
- **Schizo**
- **Schizophrenic**
- **Insane**
- **Nuts**
- **Psycho**
- **Psychotic**
- **Demented**
- **Senile**
- **Loony**
- **Lunatic**
- **Mentally ill person**
- **Person who is mentally ill**
- **Person suffering from mental illness**
- **Suffering/afflicted by mental illness**  
(This is because suffering implies that one is unwell/ unhappy. Individuals with lived experiences or in recovery can still live healthy and fulfilling lives.)
- **Committed suicide**  
(Committed suggests blame. We would not blame someone for dying from cancer for example.)

## Never say or do this:



# Language to use or avoid when interacting in written or verbal communication about/with Persons with Intellectual and Physical Disabilities



## Appropriate Language

- Persons with disabilities (generic term)
- Persons with intellectual/physical disabilities
- Youth with special needs
- Children with special needs



## Inappropriate Language

- Disabled
- Handicapped
- Cripple
- Wheelchair-bound or confined to a wheelchair
- Midget
- Slow
- Abnormal
- Defect/Defective
- Idiot
- Retarded
- Spastic
- Spaz
- Vegetable

### Never say or do this:

What happened to you then?

Is anyone with you? Why are you alone?

Don't run over me.

Use the handicapped\* parking or toilet

\* The preferred term is *accessible*



### Tip

While you can offer accommodations, refrain from assuming the need. Instead, ask about its necessity and the individual's specific requirements.



# Language to use or avoid when interacting in written or verbal communication about/with Persons with Visual Impairment



## Appropriate Language

- Person with visual impairment
- Person who is non-sighted
- Persons with residual vision
- Person with low vision
- Person who is partially sighted



## Inappropriate Language

- **Blind** (Refer to tip below)

### Never say or do this:

You are so inspiring.

I am so sorry for you.

Look there and here/It is over there.\*

You don't actually need a walking stick when you have a guide dog.^

Are you deaf too?

Is there a cure?

\* Try to be more descriptive to allow them to adjust to the environment.

^ The correct term is *white cane*, and having one doesn't necessarily omit the other.



## Tip

As discussed in NCSS' Attitude Study's Focus Group Discussions with people with disabilities, some will be offended with the term *blind* while some individuals may prefer it. During conversations, do ask for the individual's preference if you are unsure.



# Language to use or avoid when interacting in written or verbal communication about/with Persons who are d/Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing



## Appropriate Language

- d/Deaf person
- Hard-of-hearing person
- Person who is hard-of-hearing



## Inappropriate Language

- Non-hearing
- Hearing impaired
- d/deaf-mute
- Dumb
- Mute

Never say or do this:

I am so sorry for you.

Why don't you go for cochlear implant?

You can drive?

You are so inspiring.

Can you lip-read me? That is cool.



## Tip

Try striking up a conversation (using sign language or visual tools) instead of ignoring them but do not speak at the top of your voice and expect the Deaf person to understand what you are saying.



# Language to use or avoid when interacting in written or verbal communication about/with **Individual/Families in Need of Support**



## Appropriate Language

- **Individuals/families needing support**
- **Individuals/families at-risk**
- **Lower-income families**



## Inappropriate Language

- **Poor**
- **Disadvantaged/needy** (refer to tip)
- **Vulnerable**

**Never say or do this:**

I used to live in the same area as you before.

Why don't you move out?

Why don't you just get a better job? You don't look poor.



## Tip

Based on MSF's research, it is recommended that you are specific about who you are supporting (e.g. lower income families, children with special needs). However, you can still use the terms listed in the appropriate language section when necessary.





Language to use or avoid when interacting  
in written or verbal communication about/with  
**Seniors in Need of Support**



### Appropriate Language

- Seniors in need of financial/emotional support



### Inappropriate Language

- Old
- Weak
- Poor
- Needy

Never say or do this:

That is not age appropriate.

You are aging gracefully.

You are too old to do this.

How can you not remember that?



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