

# Inclusive Language Guide for Families

The words that families use to speak about their family member with an intellectual disability also becomes the language that others in the community will mirror and use. Neighbours, teachers, and others in the community will follow the lead of families and adopt similar language to describe people with intellectual disabilities. This places a responsibility on families, who must be consistent in the way they refer to or identify their family members, using language that reflects their rights and an inclusive perspective, otherwise families may unknowingly promote negative stereotypes and exclusion.

The inclusive language that families aim to use is not limited to the family movement - organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) across all

impairment groups have been working to shift the language that is used to describe disability and people with disabilities. The responsibility to push back against stereotypes is shared with the cross-disability movement, which is united in the shift towards empowering and inclusive language.

For families who are new to the disability movement, leaders of family groups may need to model inclusive language and support families with beginning to use this language. Some of the key inclusive language lessons for organisations or family groups to share with individual family members include:

## ⊘ Don't use...

### Language about sickness and suffering

"My daughter is sick with autism"

"My brother suffers from Down Syndrome"

### Language that replaces someone's name or identity with their disability

"My Downs son likes to play soccer"

"My autistic child is 9 years old"

## ✓ Instead, say...

### People with intellectual disabilities are not sick with their disability, nor do they suffer from a disability

"My daughter has autism" or "my daughter is autistic" - depending on if person-first or identity-first language is common in your country.

"My brother has Down Syndrome."

### Use the person's name, or the same language that you would use for other family members or their peers

"My son Alejandro likes to play soccer"

"My child Mahra is 9 years old"

## ⊘ Don't use...

### **Language that implies people with intellectual disabilities are "special"**

"My child has special needs"

"My son goes to a special school"

Everyone has needs - it is not "special" to need support sometimes. The "special" language also promotes the idea that people with intellectual disabilities are different and belong in "special" spaces (like "special schools") instead of being included - special schools should be called "segregated schools."

### **Language that suggests someone's "mental age" is lower than their physical age**

"My son is 12, but mentally he's really 5."

People with intellectual disability do not have a different mental age - if someone is 12 years old, they are 12 years old - no matter what their interests are, what milestones they have reached, or what their reading level is.

### **Differentiating between mild, moderate, and profound intellectual disability.**

"My child doesn't go to school because their disability is profound."

This language promotes the idea that not everyone with an intellectual disability has equal rights, and is often used to justify people who have higher support needs being excluded or only including people who need less support to be included.

## ✓ Instead, say...

### **If it is necessary to communicate that your family member has a disability, avoid "special" and just describe the disability**

"My child has an intellectual disability."

"A doctor suggested that my daughter go to a segregated school, but we are enrolling her in our local inclusive school instead."

### **When sharing a family member with an intellectual disability's age, the only option is their physical age.**

"My son is 12."

### **Communicate about your family member's needs by describing the type of support they need, not using a label that describes "functioning."**

"My child has higher support needs so will need X, Y, and Z support from the teachers to be fully included at school."

## ⊘ Don't use...

### **Results of IQ tests**

"My neighbour has an IQ of 70"

IQ tests are outdated, unreliable, and discriminate against people with intellectual disabilities. IQ levels should not be used to describe someone's disability.

### **Framing challenges in a way that implies the person with the disability is the source of the problem or the reason why they cannot do something**

"The student in a wheelchair can't go to school."

If there is a barrier in place that is preventing inclusion, name the barrier, don't blame the person.

### **Stereotypes about what your family member with an intellectual disability cannot do based on myths or prejudice**

"My nephew can't learn because he has an intellectual disability"

"My grandson can't make decisions"

Ideas about people with intellectual disabilities not being able to learn, not having autonomy, not being able to make decisions, and more, are rooted in stereotypes. People with intellectual disabilities can do all of these things.

## ✓ Instead, say...

If you wouldn't feel the need to talk about the IQ level of someone without a disability, it is not appropriate for someone with an intellectual disability either. If the goal is to communicate the level or type of support a person might need, just describe the support needed.

### **Framing access issues in terms of the barriers, not the individual with the disability**

"The school does not have an accessible entrance, which means the student using a wheelchair is prevented from entering the classroom"

Once the barrier has been named, we can identify the support or accommodation needed and eliminate the barrier that prevents effective participation.

### **If the goal is to communicate a particular challenge that a person is having, frame the conversation in terms of the support that is needed or being given**

"Getting support in these ways helps my nephew to learn on an equal basis with others"

"We use supported decision-making tools with my grandson to support him to make decisions independently"

Through families modelling using inclusive language, communities will become more inclusive in the way they talk to and about people with intellectual disabilities.

## Your turn: Inclusive Language Guide for Families

**What are some other examples of inclusive language?**

