Disability inclusive language and communication guidelines summary

Language is constantly evolving

As people's lived experiences change, so too does the language we use to describe ourselves.

It's important to take responsibility and ensure our language keeps up with those changes.

These key principles will help you play an important role in ensuring people with disability feel respected, valued and safe. This will help and welcome them to make significant contributions by participating in community life.

Principles for inclusive language

Person-first language (people with disability) and **identity-first language** (disabled people) are both used in Australia.

People with disability often have strong preferences for one term or the other, so it's best to follow the lead of the person or group you are talking about. **It's okay to ask!**

The **Social Model of Disability** recognises disability in terms of the barriers that are created by how society is organised, not by an individual's condition or medical diagnosis.

Barriers may be physical, communication, technological, socioeconomic or attitudinal. These impact their ability to fully participate in social, economic and civic life, not because of their particular disability. The social model does not deny the reality of disability, nor its impact on the individual, rather it seeks to change society to be more inclusive.

People with disability are the experts of their own needs and preferences: Ask the person you are communicating with about their language preferences, whether they require assistance, and if so, what they need.

Euphemisms: Say 'people with disability' instead of terms that may be patronising, such as 'all abilities', 'physically challenged' 'special needs' or 'differently abled'.

Be curious and ask: When making adjustments, check with the other person to see if they're effective. Don't ask intrusive or personal questions about their disability or how they acquired it. If they wish to share that with you, they will.

Disability is part of being human. Almost everyone will temporarily or permanently experience disability at some point in their life or will be a carer for someone with a disability. While it's okay to say 'people without disability', avoid referring to people as 'normal' or 'healthy.' These terms can make people with disability feel they're being referred to as 'abnormal' or 'unhealthy'.

It's okay to use common expressions. You can say 'see you later' to someone who is blind or has low vision, or 'walk to the station' with someone who uses a wheelchair. These expressions are regularly used and most people with disability will not be offended.

It's important to consider the diversity of people with disability and **intersectionality**, which recognises that people's lives are shaped by their identities, relationships and social factors. These combine to create intersecting forms of privilege or oppression depending on a person's context and existing power structures. It's important to recognise the complex way that many forms of discrimination and disadvantage can overlap, which may increase the impact of inequality.

Effective communication strategies

Be aware of the person you're talking to, their preferred way of communicating and your surroundings. Ask yourself, and check with them, if there are barriers making it difficult to communicate such as background noise.

Ask the expert. If you think someone needs assistance, ask if they need assistance before you do anything else. This shows respect for their independence and dignity.

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- If they say yes, listen and ask for specific instructions.
- If they say no, accept 'no' as an answer and leave it at that.

Be inclusive

- **Speak directly to the person with disability**, rather than speaking to their carer/family/carer/support worker or interpreter.
- **'Meet people where they're at'** by establishing eye contact when speaking with the person and maintaining it.
- If you don't understand what the person is saying, politely ask for clarification by firstly saying what you understood and asking them to repeat or rephrase**.** You may also offer a pen and paper to them if you think it's appropriate.

Be flexible and responsive

Providing assistance to others may require you to adjust how you usually work or provide services, and to be patient while a person tells you what they may need.

Respectful language and communication

Good practice

- ✓ Speak to the person with disability directly, showing respect, ask them for their name and if they have any specific preferences.
- ✓ Person-first language (people with disability) and identity-first language (disabled people) are both used in Australia.
- ✓ If you're unsure, it's best to follow the lead of the person or group you are talking about. It's okay to ask.
- ✓ If that isn't possible, use person-first language or refer to a person by their name.
- ✓ Use 'people/person with disability'. Unless a person/group has specified their preference.

Avoid

- × Referring to people with disability as 'vulnerable'. 'Vulnerability' can be caused more by how society is organised or because of external factors, and not by a person's disability.
- × It's not 'people with a disability' (singular) or 'people with disabilities' (plural).
- × Phrases such as 'the disabled' are not recommended as they reduce people to their disability.
- × Terms like 'impairment' or 'disorders' and outdated medical terms.
- × Labels and stereotypes.
- × References to 'people living with disability'.

Resources

- **People with Disability Australia**
  PWDA Language Guide:
  A guide to language about disability
- **Australian Human Rights Commission**
  Creating accessible and inclusive communications
- **Amnesty International**
  Inclusive Language and Events Guide