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# DISABILITIES MEDIA GUIDE - 'ABLEISM 101'

Author: AW Shim (2023 Interim SULS Disabilities Officer)

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## Social & Human Rights Model of Disability

We acknowledge the Social Model of Disability which – in alignment with the United Nations [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (‘CRPD’) and therefore a human rights approach to disability – describes people with disability as people who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory differences which, following interaction with structural and attitudinal barriers such as inaccessible environments, stymie their socioeconomic participation.

We recognise that inequitable environments can disable students with chronic health conditions, as well as students experiencing structural inequity. For more information about the **Social & Human Rights Model of Disability**, please watch this [short video](#) from the Disability Advocacy Resource Unit (‘DARU’) by scanning this QR code:

Short video from the  
Disability Advocacy  
Resource Unit (‘DARU’)



## Person-First Language (‘PFL’) & Identity-First Language (‘IFL’)

The author of this media guide chooses to use a mix of person-first and identity-first language (‘*person with disability*’ and ‘*disabled person*’ respectively) to reflect author preference in the disability community. Likewise, we use d/Deaf – as well as autistic and Autistic – to reflect varying preferences among disabled individuals and to reflect not only the lived experience but also their identities.

Language and media representation can have the potential to perpetuate stigma and ableist assumptions. The purpose of this guide is to help destigmatise disability and to facilitate dialogue & discourse which is more inclusive towards the disability sector.

We hope that this guide may offer the broader community some practical, evidence-based advice on discussing disability and people with lived experience.



# Commonly Used Phrases

Instead of saying...	Consider saying...	Because...
Sp*stic, Sp*zz, R***rded	Frustrating, Confusing, Perplexing, Silly	These are ableist slurs which can perpetuate the assumption that experience of having a chronic or permanent health condition is inherently negative or lesser-than.
Lame	Disappointing, Gross	Using this word to describe a disappointing or frustrating situation can perpetuate stigma around physical conditions.
Crazy, Mental, Psycho, Psychotic, Insane, Mad, Deranged	Absurd, Ridiculous	Because mental illness and <a href="#">psychosocial disability</a> are stigmatised, an over-casualised utilisation of these words can <a href="#">reinforce unconscious biases</a> .
Person with Autism, Suffers from Autism	Autistic person	<p>Overwhelming research from the UK and peak bodies, such as <a href="#">Amaze Australia</a>, underscore that the autistic community prefers Identity-First Language ('IFL'), as it acknowledges autistic pride and autistic joy.</p> <p>Each person will have their individual preferences of how to describe them regarding IFL as opposed to Person-First Language ('PFL') such as 'person with autism', but acknowledging the consensus from the autistic community can provide an important step to self-determination.</p>

# Commonly Used Phrases

Instead of saying...	Consider saying...	Because...
<p>Has overcome the odds</p> <p>Is an inspiration</p>	<p>Has achieved</p> <p>Is a (insert job title or another descriptor which acknowledges the person's achievements as well as their humanity)</p>	<p>Stella Young, a Disability Advocate, coined the term '<a href="#">inspiration porn</a>' to describe the often well-intentioned but paternalistic narratives around disability.</p> <p>Language that suggests that people are limited by their disability and therefore unlikely to achieve success can be paradoxically harmful by creating a self-fulfilling prophecy... in which opportunities are not provided to the disability sector.</p> <p>In general, we recommend exercising caution with the word 'inspiration' and reading more into 'Inspiration Porn' as a phenomenon, as suggested <a href="#">here</a>, <a href="#">here</a>, and <a href="#">here</a>.</p>
<p>Low functioning / High functioning</p> <p>Mild autism / severe autism</p>	<p>Low support needs / High support needs</p>	<p>Terms such as 'high functioning' and 'mild' can not only medicalise and pathologise a person, thereby perpetuating a Medical Model of Disability, but also invalidate a person's lived experience, particularly of discrimination, self-stigmatisation, and internalised ableism.</p>



# Commonly Used Phrases

Instead of saying...	Consider saying...	Because...
Dumb	Illogical, ignorant	<p>As '<a href="#">Ableism/Language</a>' from Lydia Brown notes, 'dumb' is a term which can be offensive as it was historically used against d/Deaf people and people with speech-related disabilities. Many Deaf people do not in fact identify as having a disability and will also use IFL.</p> <p>Deaf Australia is the peak body for d/Deaf Australians, representing culturally Deaf Australians and hard-of-hearing people. It is a Deaf-led advocacy and information organisation that supports Deaf, Deafblind, and hard-of-hearing people and others who use Auslan (Australian Sign Language) as their language of preference. They regularly organise events, such as the Colin Allen AM Lecture, to celebrate Deaf culture and to acknowledge the Australian Deaf Community, which can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People who use Auslan (whether they are deaf or hearing);</li> <li>• People deaf from birth or an early age;</li> <li>• Hearing Children of Deaf Adults ('CODAs'); and</li> <li>• Some hearing people who live and work with Deaf people.</li> </ul> <p>According to the Deaf Australia and the Australian Deaf Community, to acknowledge Deaf culture is to acknowledge the intertwining of language and culture — and to acknowledge that members of the Australian Deaf Community identify as members of a language group or a linguistic and cultural minority group.<sup>1</sup> Many Deaf adults with Deaf children disagree with a societal assessment of Deaf children as 'lesser-than' or 'disabled', hence why they often characterise being Deaf as being a part of a culture rather than having a disability per se.<sup>2</sup></p> <p>Visit: <a href="https://deafaustalia.org.au">https://deafaustalia.org.au</a>            Contact: <a href="mailto:info@deafaustalia.org.au">info@deafaustalia.org.au</a> &amp; <a href="https://deafaustalia.org.au/contact">https://deafaustalia.org.au/contact</a>.</p>

<sup>1</sup> See, eg, Harlan Lane, 'Do Deaf People Have a Disability?' (2002) 2(4) *Sign Language Studies* 356, 365-79; Steven E. Brown, 'What Is Disability Culture?' 22(2) *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34; Jemina Napier and Alastair McEwin, 'Do Deaf People Have the Right to Serve as Jurors in Australia?' (2015) 40(1) *Alternative Law Journal* 23, 23-26.



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# Commonly Used Phrases

Instead of saying...	Consider saying...	Because...
<p>Confined to a wheelchair / Wheelchair-bound</p>	<p>Uses a wheelchair / wheelchair user</p>	<p>Terminology like this can be offensive to some people as the experience of using a wheelchair can actually be liberating — as opposed to confining — by enabling greater freedom of mobility.</p>
<p>Handicapped / Handicapable / Differently-abled</p>	<p>Disabled person, person with disability, accessible parking, accessibility parking, disabled-only parking</p>	<p>This term can be an euphemistic term for people with physical or mobility-related disability. Treating disability as a ‘dirty word’ can perpetuate stigma and structural ableism.</p> <p>See also the <a href="#">Disability Language Style Guide</a> from the National Center on Disability and Journalism, as well as the <b>#SayTheWord</b> Movement as <a href="#">articulated by Vanderbilt University</a>.</p>
<p>Special / Special Education (“Special Ed”)  Special Interests / Special Needs</p>	<p>Disabled person with individualised support needs, person with disability with individualised support needs / Inclusive Education  Focused interests / Focussed needs or Disability support needs</p>	<p>The term ‘special needs’ and ‘special education’ can be found in the education sector as an euphemism for disability and disability support needs. Research indicates that many people find these terms quite paternalistic and offensive.<sup>3</sup></p> <p>Although acknowledging <a href="#">‘Twice Exceptionality (‘2e’)</a> and the prevalence of bullying &amp; discrimination experienced in classrooms remains relevant,<sup>4</sup> caution should be exercised with the word ‘special’ as a whole.</p>

<sup>3</sup> Kristen Bottema-Beutel, Steven K. Kapp, Jessica Nina Lester, Noah J. Sasson, and Brittany N. Hand, ‘Avoiding Ableist Language: Suggestions for Autism Researchers’ (2021) 3(1) *Autism in Adulthood* 18.  
<sup>4</sup> Kate Bachtel & Rachel Fell, ‘Trauma Induced Twice-Exceptionality: Preventing Psychological Injury of Gifted Children in the Classroom’ in Fernanda Hellen Ribeiro Piske, Kristina Henry Collins, & Karen B. Arnstein (eds), *Critical Issues in Servicing Twice Exceptional Students* (Springer, 2022) 87.



# Commonly Used Phrases

Instead of saying...	Consider saying...	Because...
Midg*t (Midg*ts)	Person with dwarfism / Little people / Dwarf (Dwarfs)	<p>The disability community considers the term ‘midg*t’ – or ‘m’ word – to be offensive, and the LPA has issued a <a href="#">public statement against this term</a>.</p> <p>When in doubt, please consult the <a href="#">Disability Language Style Guide</a> from the National Center on Disability and Journalism and ask the person in question how they would like to be described.</p>

## References & Acknowledgements:

This language guide leverages the work from not only the Melbourne University Law Students’ Society (‘MULSS’) and their [Statement on Ableism](#) but also Amaze Australia’s [language guide / media guide](#) on how to discuss autism and the autistic community in alignment with the community’s preference for Identity-First Language (‘IFL’).

People With Disabilities Australia (‘PWDA’) has a [language guide / media guide](#) for members of the broader community so that they can discuss the disability community, in conjunction with the Victorian Government’s [guide to language and media for discussing disability](#).

For more information and peruse the hyperlinked references, please request a PDF version of this document.

## Endorsements & Signatories:

