

Disability Language Guide

The words we use to describe individuals with disabilities matters. Although there is not one language style preference shared across all those who have a disability, it remains important to use respectful and inclusive language when communicating with or talking about people with disabilities. Here are some considerations to keep in mind:

- Putting the person first, as in “people with disability,” is called people-first language. It is commonly used to reduce the dehumanization of disability.
- If someone is willing to disclose their disability, it is best to ask them how they want you to refer to (or not refer to) their disability.
- Remember that it is possible for two people with the same diagnosis or circumstance to feel completely differently about their disability.
- It is OK to identify a person’s disability when it is necessary for clarity or provides important information. Do not mention someone’s disability unless it is essential to the story

Outdated and Inappropriate Term	Use instead
Retarded, mentally handicapped, mentally challenged	Specify the type of disability being referenced, e.g. a person with an intellectual disability
Differently-abled, Special, Exceptional	Terms like “differently-abled,” although well-meaning, can be received as “condescending, offensive or simply a way of avoiding talking about disability” [NCDJ]
slow/lame	Walks with a cane, uses crutches
Wheelchair-bound or confined to a wheelchair	Person who uses a wheelchair
Victim, cripple, handicapped, special needs	Person with a disability
normal, able-bodied	non-disabled or the phrase, “does not have a disability.”
crazy, psycho, mad, deranged	Person with a mental illness, or person with an emotional disability
Mongoloid, Downs	A person with Down Syndrome
handicapped parking, handicapped bathroom	Accessible parking, accessible bathroom
Vertically challenged, Midget	Use “dwarf,” “someone with dwarfism/short stature” or “little person.”

Sources: [National Center on Disability and Journalism](#), [Appropriate Terms to Use](#), National Disability Authority & [Stanford Disability Initiative Board Disability Language Guide](#)

Glossary of Terms

Ableism is the discrimination of and social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior. At its heart, ableism is rooted in the assumption that disabled people require ‘fixing’ and defines people by their disability. Like racism and sexism, [ableism classifies entire groups of people as ‘less than.’](#) and includes harmful stereotypes, misconceptions, and generalizations of people with disabilities. Source: [Ableism 101: What it is and what we can do to fix it](#) by Ashley Eisenmenger, Access Living.

Accessible: In the case of a facility, readily usable by a particular individual; in the case of a program or activity, presented or provided in such a way that a particular individual can participate, with or without auxiliary aid(s); in the case of electronic resources, accessible with or without assistive computer technology. Source: [Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology](#)

Access barriers: Any obstruction that prevents people with disabilities from using standard facilities, equipment and resources. Source: [Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology](#)

Accommodation: An accommodation is a change that removes a barrier to learning or getting work done. Accommodations don’t change *what* students learn in school. They change *how* students learn and *how* they get their work done. For example, students might get extra time to read through a word problem, but they don’t get fewer problems or easier ones. Source: [Accommodations: What are they and how they work \(Understood\)](#)

Adapted Physical Education (A.P.E.) Adapted Physical Education is physical education which has been adapted or modified, so that it is as appropriate for the person with a disability as it is for a person without a disability. **Adapted versus Adaptive:** Adapted physical education is the proper term, used in federal and state guidelines and in all current major texts, journals, and Internet sites in the field. The basic idea is that service delivery is adapted, while behaviors are adaptive. The program is adapted to meet the needs of each student through modifications and accommodations. The student is not required to adapt to the conditions of the program as would be implied with adaptive physical education refers to adapted behaviors. Source: [Adapted Physical Education National Standards](#)

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA): A comprehensive federal law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in employment, public services, public accommodations and services operated by private entities, and telecommunications. Source: [Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology](#)

American Sign Language (ASL): A visually perceived language based on articulated hand gestures and their placement relative to the body. Non-manual markers such as facial expressions and movements of the body are also used. ASL is the dominant signed language

in North America. ASL is not a universal language; many other countries have their own forms of sign language. Source: [Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology](#)

Assistive Technology: Technology used to assist a person with a disability (e.g., wheelchair, hand splints, computer based equipment). Source: [Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology](#)

Assistance Device: Any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities. Source: [Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology](#)

Child Find: Child Find is an ongoing process through which all children, from birth through 21 (i.e., through the day before the student's 22nd birthday), or who may be eligible for early intervention, or who may be in need of special education services are identified, located and evaluated. Each school district is responsible for actively locating, identifying and evaluating all children who live within the district boundaries who may qualify to receive special education and/or related services. Source: [Educational Rights and Responsibilities: Understanding Special Education in Illinois \(Ch.1 Child Find\)](#)

Co-Teaching: Co-teaching is the practice of pairing teachers together in a classroom to share the responsibilities of planning, instructing, and assessing students. Co-teaching is often implemented with general educators and special educators paired together as part of an initiative to create a more inclusive classroom. Source: [What is Co-Teaching: An Introduction to Co-Teaching and Inclusion](#)

Deaf Culture: A set of values, behaviors, and traditions belonging to the deaf and close allies. American Deaf culture centers on the use of ASL and identification and unity with other people who are deaf. Source: [Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology](#)

Differentiated Instruction: Differentiated instruction consists of the efforts of teachers to respond to variance among learners in the classroom. Teachers can differentiate at least four classroom elements based on student readiness, interest, or learning profile. These elements include Content, Process, Products and Learning environment. Source: [What is Differentiated Instruction by Carol Ann Tomlinson](#)

Disability: Physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; a record of such an impairment; or being regarded as having such an impairment (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990).

Discrimination: Discrimination is unfair treatment of one particular person or group of people. The Office of Civil Rights (OCR) protects the rights of persons with disabilities, including students

and parents, under two federal laws in the education context: Section 504 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Under these laws, no person shall, solely by reason of their disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities, or be subjected to discrimination. Source: [U.S. Department of Education](#)

Dynamic Learning Maps Assessment: Dynamic Learning Maps® (DLM®) assessments are designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities for whom general state assessments are not appropriate, even with accommodations. DLM assessments offer these students a way to show what they know and can do in mathematics, English language arts, and science. Source: [Dynamic Learning Maps](#).

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): In general, all school age children who are individuals with disabilities as defined by Section 504 and IDEA are entitled to FAPE. Source: [U.S. Department of Education](#) Under the IDEA, FAPE requires that a school district offer eligible students an IEP that is reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child's circumstances. Source: [U.S. Department of Education Q&A on Andrew F. Case](#). For purposes of Section 504, FAPE refers to the provision of general or special education and related services that are designed to meet individual educational needs of students with disabilities as adequately as the needs of students without disabilities are met. Source: [U.S Department of Education OCR FAQ about Students with Disabilities](#).

FBA/BIP

The first step in developing a good behavior plan is to conduct a Functional Behavioral Assessment, or FBA. The FBA is a process to improve understanding of problem behavior in order to identify what skills need to be taught, and to develop a better behavior plan. The IEP team uses the information from the FBA to develop a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) to:

- teach replacement behaviors which have the same function as the problem behavior;
- make changes to the situations that contribute to the behavior; and
- teach other missing skills which increase the likelihood of the appropriate behavior happening.

It's important to remember that the purpose of a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) is not to outline punishments, but rather to define what the adults will do differently to better support the needs of the student. Source: [Education Rights and Responsibilities: Understanding Special Education in Illinois. Chapter 9: Behavior Intervention Plans](#).

General Education: The United States Department of Education defines the term to encompass classrooms and other settings in schools such as lunchrooms and playgrounds in which children without disabilities participate. Students with IEPs can receive specially designed instruction with supplementary aids and services in the general education classroom. The amount of time a child spends in the general education program is part of his/her/their Placement. General Education is the curriculum designed for all children which is meant to meet state standards. Source: [Education Rights and Responsibilities: Understanding Special Education in Illinois](#) and [What is General Education? By Jerry Webster \(2019\)](#).

Inclusion: The term inclusion captures, in one word, an all-embracing societal ideology. Regarding individuals with disabilities and special education, inclusion secures opportunities for students with disabilities to learn alongside their non-disabled peers in general education classrooms. Honestly establishing a successful inclusive classroom varies in complexity, based upon the challenges created by the disability at hand. However, a knowledgeable approach and positive attitudes on the parts of parents and teachers proves vital to triumphing over any obstacles which may emerge. Source: [Special Education Guide on Inclusion](#)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) This federal law, enacted in 1990--and reauthorized in 1997--amends and renames the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA). The law ensures a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to students with one of thirteen disabilities. A portion of special education funding to schools is dependent upon compliance with this law and its subsequent amendments. Source: [IDEA: What you need to know, Understood](#)

Individualized Education Plan (IEP): The IEP team, including parents, general educators, and special educators, develops the individualized education plan when a student qualifies for Special Education Services. The IEP includes the student's present level of school performance, education goals, and objectives for the student, and accommodations the student will receive. It documents the specific services the student needs, how where and how often services will be provided, and how progress will be measured. IEPs are reviewed annually with the IEP team. Source: [What is an IEP? \(Understood\)](#)

Least Restrictive Environment: LRE is part of the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#). IDEA says that children who receive special education should learn in the least restrictive environment. This means that to the maximum extent appropriate, they should have access to general education and spend as much time as possible with peers who do not receive special education. Special classes, separate schools or removal from general education should only happen when the nature or severity of a child's disability is such that supplementary aids and services can't provide the child with an appropriate education. The Least Restrictive Environment for each child is determined by the student's IEP team. Source: [LRE: What you need to know \(Understood\)](#)

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is a framework for continuous improvement that is systemic, prevention-focused, and data-informed, providing a coherent continuum of supports responsive to meet the needs of ALL learners. Source: [Illinois MTSS Network](#)

Modification: Modifications are changes to *what* your child is taught or expected to do in school. Modifications may alter the curriculum and expectations of mastery. Modifications aren't the same as accommodations, which are changes that allow your child to access the general education curriculum but do not alter the curriculum or expectations. Only students

with an IEP or a 504 plan can have modifications. Source: [Modifications: What You Need to Know \(Understood\)](#)

Neurotypical: The word Neurotypical (NT) is the opposite of Neurodivergent. Neurotypical means being "neurologically typical" - within the typical (average) range for human neurology. The term originated in the autistic community, as a way to refer to non-autistic people, and is used to describe a person whose neurological development and state are typical, conforming to what most people would perceive as normal. Source: [Disability World: What is Neurodiversity, Neurodivergent and Neurotypical?](#)

Neurodiversity is broadly defined as an approach to learning and disability that suggests diverse [neurological conditions](#) appear as a result of normal variations in the human genome. Neurodiversity advocates promote support systems (such as inclusion-focused services, accommodations, communication and assistive technologies, occupational training, and independent living support) that allow those who are neuro-divergent to live their lives as they are, rather than being coerced or forced to adopt uncritically accepted ideas of normality, or to conform to a clinical ideal. Source: [Disability World: What is Neurodiversity, Neurodivergent and Neurotypical?](#)

Paraprofessional: Paraprofessionals are important members of a school's staff. They're sometimes called instructional aides or teacher assistants. They are credentialed education professionals who work alongside and under the direction of a certified teacher or school professional. Paraprofessionals provide different kinds of support that help make classrooms more inclusive. Source: [Paraprofessionals: What you need to know \(Understood\)](#)

Person First Language: People-first language emphasizes the individuality, equality and dignity of people with disabilities. Rather than defining people primarily by their disability, people-first language conveys respect by emphasizing the fact that people with disabilities are first and foremost just that—people. It is best to use people-first language when communicating about disability issues, whether verbally or in writing. It is important to note that many people with disabilities, particularly younger people, are choosing to use "identity-first" language such as "autistic" or "disabled." How a person chooses to self-identify is up to them, and they should not be corrected or admonished if they choose not to use identity-first language. Source: [Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion](#)

Referral: A referral is the process of requesting that a student be evaluated for special education and related services. Any concerned person may refer a student, including teachers, principals, parents, other agency personnel, or the student. Once a referral is made, the school district will decide whether to evaluate the student. If the district declines to evaluate, it should put its decision and the reasons for the decision in writing and advise parents of their right to challenge the decision in a due process hearing. Source: [Special Education: The Referral and](#)

[Evaluation Process \(Parent Companion\)](#), [The Parent Guide: Illinois State Board of Education Special Education Department \(English/Spanish\)](#)

Related Services: Related services help a child meet their educational goals, but they aren't necessarily specialized instruction. Related services are typically part of a child's Individualized Education Program (IEP). Some students receive related services through a 504 plan. Common examples of related services include speech and language, occupational or physical therapy, and social work. Source: [Related Services for Kids Who Learn and Think Differently: What You Need to Know](#)

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a multi-tier approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs. The RTI process begins with high-quality instruction and universal screening of all children in the general education classroom. Struggling learners are provided with interventions at increasing levels of intensity to accelerate their rate of learning. Progress is closely monitored to assess both the learning rate and level of performance of individual students. Educational decisions about the intensity and duration of interventions are based on individual student response to instruction. Source: [RTI Network](#)

Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act was the first disability civil rights law to be enacted in the United States. It prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in programs that receive federal financial assistance, and set the stage for enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Section 504 works together with the ADA and IDEA to protect children and adults with disabilities from exclusion, and unequal treatment in schools, jobs and the community. Under this law, individuals with disabilities are defined as persons with a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities. People who have a history of, or who are regarded as having a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, are also covered. **Major life activities** include caring for one's self, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, working, performing manual tasks, and learning. Source: [US Department of Health and Human Services 504 Fact Sheet](#)

504 Plan: 504 plans are formal plans that schools develop to give children with disabilities the support they need to make education accessible for students with a condition that limits daily activities in a major way. These plans prevent discrimination and they protect the rights of children with disabilities in school. 504 plans often include accommodations which can include:

- Changes to the environment (like taking tests in a quiet space)
- Changes to instruction (like checking in frequently on key concepts)
- Changes to how curriculum is presented (like getting outlines of lessons)

504 plans aren't part of special education. So, they're different from IEPs. 504 plans and IEPs are covered by different laws and work in different ways. But the end goal is the same: to help students thrive in school. Source: [What is a 504 Plan? \(Understood\)](#)

Self-Contained: The term “self-contained classroom” refers to a classroom, where a special education teacher is responsible for the instruction of all academic subjects. The classroom is typically separated from general education classrooms but within a neighborhood school. A self-contained classroom is a special education placement that falls near the middle of a continuum of program options that range in restrictiveness, where the general education classroom is least restrictive and a hospital or a homebound placement is most restrictive. Student-to-teacher ratios in self-contained classrooms are usually smaller than in general education classrooms and other less restrictive special education placements such as resource classrooms. Source: [Understanding Self-Contained Classrooms in Public Schools](#)

Special Education: Special education refers to a range of services that can be provided in different ways and in different settings. If your child qualifies for special education, your child will receive individualized teaching and other key resources at no cost to you. Special education is tailored to meet the needs of students with disabilities. There is no “one size fits all” approach to special education. It’s tailored to meet each student’s needs. Source: [Understanding Special Education](#)

Universal Design: Designing programs, services, tools, and facilities so that they are usable, without modification, by the widest range of users possible, taking into account a variety of abilities and disabilities. Source: [Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology](#)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that helps give all students an equal opportunity to succeed. This approach offers flexibility in the ways students access material, engage with it and show what they know. There are 3 main principles of UDL: Multiple means of engagement, Multiple means of representation and multiple means of action and expression.

Source: [What is Universal Design for Learning? \(Understood\)](#)

Disability Categories Recognized in Illinois

Source: [ISBE Special Education Disability Areas](#)

Autism is a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three, that adversely affects a child's educational performance. (A child who manifests the characteristics of autism after age 3 could be diagnosed as having autism if the other criteria of this Section are satisfied.) Other characteristics often associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences. The term does not apply if a child's educational performance is adversely affected primarily because the child has an emotional disturbance.

Deaf-Blindness means concomitant hearing and visual impairments, the combination of which causes such severe communication and other developmental and educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for children with deafness or children with blindness.

Deafness means a hearing impairment that is so severe that the child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification, that adversely affects a child's educational performance.

Developmental Delay: Children aged three through nine experiencing **developmental delays** include a child— (1) Who is experiencing developmental delays, as defined by the State and as measured by appropriate diagnostic instruments and procedures, in one or more of the following areas: Physical development, cognitive development, communication development, social or emotional development, or adaptive development; and (2) Who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services.

Emotional Disability (includes schizophrenia but does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance) means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:

- An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors;
- An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers;
- Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances;
- A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; or
- A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

Hearing Impairments means an impairment in hearing, whether permanent or fluctuating, that adversely affects a child's educational performance but that is not included under the definition of deafness.

Intellectual Disability means significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child's educational performance.

Multiple Disabilities means concomitant impairments (such as intellectual disability-blindness or intellectual disability-orthopedic impairment), the combination of which causes such severe educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for one of the impairments. Multiple disabilities does not include deaf-blindness.

Orthopedic Impairment means a severe orthopedic impairment that adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term includes impairments caused by congenital anomaly (e.g., clubfoot, absence of some member, etc.), impairments caused by disease (e.g., Poliomyelitis,

bone tuberculosis, etc.), and impairments from other causes (e.g., cerebral palsy, amputations, and fractures or burns that cause contractures).

Other Health Impairment means having limited strength, vitality or alertness, including a heightened sensitivity to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment that

- is due to chronic or acute health problems such as asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, or sickle cell anemia; and
- adversely affects a child's educational performance.

Specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disability, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. In accordance with 23 Illinois Administrative Code 226.130, beginning with the 2010-2011 school year, Illinois districts are required to use a process that determines how a child responds to scientific, research-based interventions as part of the evaluation procedures to determine special education eligibility under the category of specific learning disability (SLD). While this requirement is specific to SLD, districts also have the option of using such a process as part of the evaluation procedures for other disability categories.

Speech or Language Impairment means a communication disorder, such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment, that adversely affects a child's educational performance.

Traumatic Brain Injury means an acquired injury to the brain caused by an external physical force, resulting in total or partial functional disability or psychosocial impairment, or both, that adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term applies to open or closed head injuries resulting in impairments in one or more areas, such as cognition; language; memory; attention; reasoning; abstract thinking; judgment; problem-solving; sensory, perceptual, and motor abilities; psychosocial behavior; psychosocial functions; information processing; and speech. The term does not apply to brain injuries that are congenital or degenerative or to brain injuries induced by birth trauma.

Visual Impairment means an impairment in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term includes both partial sight and blindness.

Resources:

[Ableism 101: What it is and what we can do to fix it](#) by Ashley Eisenmenger, Access Living

[Inclusive Education: What it Means, Proven Strategies and a Case Study](#) by Lilla McManis, PhD.

[A Summary of the Evidence on Inclusive Education](#), Abt Associates

[What is and isn't covered Under FAPE?](#)

[Significant Disproportionality in Special Education](#), National Center for Learning Disabilities