



Language Guide

The language we use is important. The way we talk about people can influence attitudes and impact people’s lives. It’s important to not speak about others as problems or challenges, or as the object of pity or charity. Negative language such as ‘suffering from’, ‘paralysed by’ or ‘struggling with’ focuses on any deficits or challenges a child may experience. Instead, think of a child as a whole—focus on their strengths, interests and personality traits.

So, what language do you use to talk about a child’s disability? It is up to the child and their family. Their preferences take priority over the recommendations below.

Some families prefer a person-first approach, where you refer to the person before the disability—so ‘child with autism’. This puts the focus on the young person, rather than his or her disability. However, others may prefer identify-first language, so ‘autistic child’ rather than a ‘child with autism’. This can help individuals to claim their disabilities with pride.

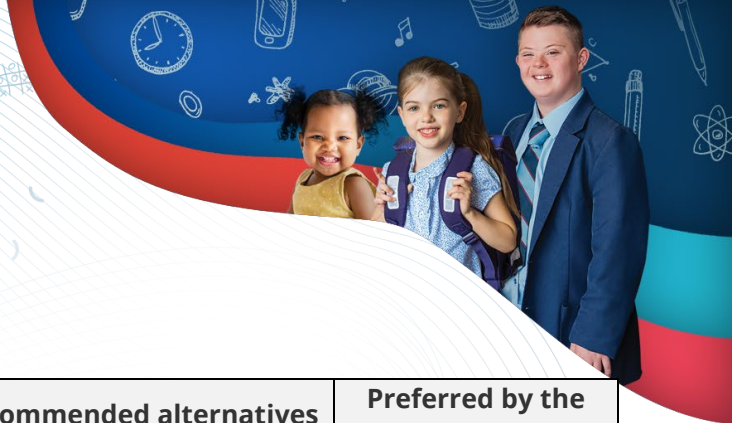
There is not always a right way. The best approach is to use the child’s name when talking to them or about them — the same as you would with any other person. If you’re not sure, ask them or their family how they like to refer to their disability and use their language.

Keep in mind that there’s no comparable word for disability in Aboriginal languages. This means that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people with disabilities do not identify as a person with disability. This is important to remember when talking to the child or their family.

Consider using the table below to think about terms to avoid, recommended alternatives and to write down the language preferred by the child and/or their family.

Content note: This table contains ableist and offensive language because it includes terms to avoid.

	Terms to avoid	Recommended alternatives	Preferred by the child/family
When referring to a child with disability in general	afflicted by _____ crippled by _____ suffers from _____ victim of _____ handicapped differently abled disabled child especially abled special needs	child with disability has disability lives with disability	
When referring to a child with a physical disability	wheelchair bound paraplegic quadriplegic physically disabled	child who uses a wheelchair child with quadriplegia child with paraplegia child with physical disability	



	Terms to avoid	Recommended alternatives	Preferred by the child/family
When referring to a child with an intellectual disability	intellectually challenged mentally defective mentally disabled mentally retarded mentally handicapped simple special	child with cognitive disability child with intellectual disability	
When referring to a child who has a learning disability	slow slow learner retarded special needs	child with learning disability	
When referring to a child who has autism	aspy/aspie high-functioning autism profoundly autistic (autistic^)	child with autism child on the autism spectrum neuroatypical (autistic^)	
When referring to a child with sensory disability	blind as a bat deaf and dumb mute	blind (if they identify that way) Deaf/deaf (if they identify that way) child with a vision impairment child with a hearing impairment	
When referring to a child who does not have a disability	able bodied abled healthy normal hearing sighted well	child without disability non-disabled child	
When referring to a child who does not have intellectual, psychosocial or cognitive disability	normal sound of mind	neurotypical	

Adapted from: People With Disability Australia. (2019). 'What do I say? A guide to language about disability'.

^Some children and/or their families may prefer this language, while others may not. Always ask a child and their family what language they would prefer you to use.

Note: For simplicity we have used "child" throughout to refer to a child or student, however the information provided is relevant across all age groups.

To learn more about specific disabilities and how to incorporate a child's strengths when developing strategies to support them in the classroom, visit [AllPlay Learn](https://allplaylearn.org.au) and [AllPlay Learn's Online Professional Learning Courses](https://allplaylearn.org.au).



Frequently asked questions about talking with a young person with disability, or their family:

1. How do I say ‘Hello’ to a child with disability?

- Say hi and use the child’s name.
- Think about your body language and facial expression. Be open and friendly.
- Some young people may communicate in different ways. For example, they may use sign language, gestures, or pictures. If you’re unsure, ask the child or their family about how best to communicate.

2. How do you talk to a child in a wheelchair?

- Say hello and use the child’s name.
- Come down to the child’s level and make eye contact by kneeling or sitting on a bench.
- Think of a child’s wheelchair as part of their personal space. This means not touching or leaning on the chair without asking.

3. How do I use strength-based language when describing the challenges a child may be experiencing in the classroom?

- Explicitly identify a child’s strengths and what they can do. Many challenges can, in specific situations, also be a strength.
- Frame challenges in terms of external supports that may be needed.
- Identify a range of terms that can be utilised in place of deficit-based terminology.

Below are some examples that you may find helpful:

Deficit-based language	Strengths-based language
Strengths and weaknesses	Strengths and abilities
is unable to...	With support, he can...
She doesn’t adjust well to changes in routine.	She may follow routines and class rules well as she tends to like things to be done in a particular way or order.
He doesn’t understand abstract concepts.	He tends to learn well with concrete, rather than abstract, examples.
She can’t apply a skill learned in one task to another context.	She benefits from support in using a skill she learned in one task in another context.
He becomes upset when plans change without warning.	He tends to be more comfortable when he is given warning about an upcoming change.
She struggles to follow instructions.	She finishes tasks quickly and with enthusiasm, but I have observed that at times she misses instructions. Are there strategies you use at home that might be helpful in the classroom?
His motor skills are underdeveloped, and he becomes angry and oppositional when we are completing craft activities.	He listens carefully to instructions and takes pride in his work. He becomes frustrated with work involving fine motor skills, and some additional supports or modified tools/activities will enable him to complete these activities to his satisfaction.