

“Autistic children” or “children with autism:” The importance of “person-first” language

Danielle Liso, PhD, BCBA
Clinical Consultant to Autism Action South Africa

Perhaps you have come across individuals who use the term “autistic child” and conversely, those who prefer the use of the term “child with autism.” While these two phrases may seem one and the same, they illustrate a very important distinction worth taking a few moments to consider.

First, individuals with disabilities and disability rights advocates have spent years asserting that although an individual may have a disabling condition, that person’s disability is not the defining factor in their lives. In other words, a person’s disability, diagnosed or otherwise, does not define who that person is. Think of the individuals you know who have a disability. Surely you will attest that each of them has personalities and interests that supersede any disability they might have. Furthermore, to list a person’s disability before their label as a human being, as in “retarded person” or “autistic person,” is to suggest that mental retardation or autism is a more important characteristic than the human status. Similarly, using related phrases such as “victim of autism” or “person suffering with autism” may suggest helplessness, have detrimentally negative overtones, and suggest disability over ability.

On the other hand, it deserves mention that the use of the word “autistic” does still exist in acceptable forms, namely, its use as an adjective not associated with a person. So, although the field discourages the use of the term “autistic person” to describe an individual, it is acceptable to use the phrases “autistic characteristic” (although “characteristic of autism” is still preferred). Similarly, the diagnostic manual that is used to identify autism, the DSM-IV, still refers to one of the diagnoses on the autism spectrum as “autistic disorder.” Again, this is



considered acceptable in the autism community because the word “autistic” is being used to describe a disorder (a compilation of characteristics or observed behaviors), not an individual.

The publication manual that drives all professional writing, known as the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA), requires that professional writers use “nonhandicapping language” when referring to individuals with disabilities. Handicapping language, such as “autistic individual,” may suggest bias or judgment; therefore, nonhandicapping language is critical for illustrating the respect that all individuals deserve. The APA manual directs writers to be sensitive to the use of all labels. When speaking about individuals with disabilities in particular, remember that when you list the disability before the individual, you may even overexaggerate its severity, and certainly, its relative importance as compared to the other characteristics associated with that individual.

Whether you are writing a professional document or simply talking about issues related to disability, consider how your language is perceived—what does it say about the person about which you are speaking? What does it say about you? Ask yourself this—how would you want to be defined? Surely “four-eyed blonde” and “short, freckled brunette” are not satisfactory terms to describe you, even if these phrases are, indeed, factual. Autism Action South Africa strives to maintain a positive and hopeful outlook about the progress, dreams, and goals of individuals with autism. With that in mind, let’s focus on what our kids can do, not what their disability might [wrongly] suggest they cannot. By putting them before their label, you are showing that you believe this to be true.

