

How to Speak to Youth with Disabilities

By: Raquel Castaneda



The way we speak says a lot, whether we realize it or not. Especially when we speak to individuals with disabilities; more so with youth with disabilities. It is important that we are aware of our terminology and manner of speaking. There is power in our language and in what we put labels on, so we should be able to decipher what is appropriate and what is not. In order to be sure that what we say and how we say it is appropriate, here are a few tips and recommendations to keep in mind when speaking to youth with disabilities.

The first thing we need to understand is that people with disabilities are not suffering from a tragedy, struggling to become normal, victims, nor are they retarded. The diagnosis of a person, is not the most important characteristic of a person. We do not go around introducing ourselves as, “Hello, I’m diabetic Jane.” So why would we do the same to a person with any kind of disability. They are people first, not their diagnosis.

There have been many times that I have heard someone say, “poor thing”, “how sad”, or even “it makes me feel so sorry” referring to my younger brother who has Down Syndrome. I know they say this with good intentions; they are not trying to be rude and ignorant but things like that are not acceptable to say. My brother lives a very happy and productive life, and nothing about that is sad.

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FHF of Jefferson
201 Evans Road
Building One, Suite 100
Harahan, LA 70123
504.888.9111
504.888.0246 (fax)
www.fhfjefferson.org



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When speaking to youth with disabilities, it is important to remember that they deserve to be treated as an equal. Give them eye contact and make sure that you give them time to listen, process, and respond. If they are having trouble understanding, please be patient with them. I know that sometimes it can be frustrating to constantly repeat yourself, but try not to let that show.

They are not oblivious to the difference in your tone when you speak, so be mindful of the tones you use and the reactions you give after they respond. In my brother's case, unfortunately I can lose my patience. The more I have to repeat myself, the louder I can get. He notices when this happens and constantly apologizes. Once he starts apologizing I feel terrible and explain to him that he did nothing wrong and he should not apologize. Another important thing to remember is to use appropriate language that they will understand; don't use jargon, difficult words, or figure of speeches.

Understand that sometimes it takes time for them to trust others. Everyone is different and not everyone will react the same way. The difficulties of one is not the same for all. The important thing to take away from this is that they are people first; and we need to respect that.

More information and tips can be found at::

https://www.aacap.org/App_Themes/AACAP/docs/youth_resources/misc/Youth_Voice_Tip_Sheet_2012.pdf

and:

http://www.sccoe.org/depts/students/inclusion-collaborative/Documents/Person-First_Language_Article.pdf



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