Use of language: special educational needs, disabilities and bullying

Disablist language:

The age-old phrase 'sticks and stones may break my bones – but words will never hurt me' has been proved untrue. We know that repetitive use of disablist language can have a lasting effect on the self-esteem and mental health of the person experiencing this language.

We know that when words like 'retard', 'spastic' or 'mong' are used they offend people with disabilities, their families and friends; and yet they are still being used regularly in society. **We need to be very clear with young people that this type of language is not acceptable to use - in the same way that using racist, homophobic and sexist words is wrong.**

There should be clarity from schools and other professionals working with children and young people that this type of language is offensive and can hurt others. It can sometimes be helpful for schools to undertake activities where they agree, as part of their inclusion policy descriptions, words that are positive and acceptable, and the schools' position when negative and derogatory language is used.

Some words have been taken out of their original context, and by repeated negative use, now have negative and derogatory connotations (e.g. spastic is a medical descriptive term, but has become a term used to tease, taunt and belittle children and adults). Some words and language also have historical contexts that make their use unwelcome and unacceptable.

'Sticks and stones may break my bones and words leave emotional scars that never heal' - quote from a young disabled person

"It makes you feel angry, sad, not confident." Quote from a young disabled person talking about disablist language

Below is a list about the use of language for children and young people with disabilities to allow you to set the best example for the young people you work with. It is not exhaustive, but is a starting point.

Avoid: Handicap, handicapped.   **Use:** Disability, disabled person or person with a disability.

Why? Emphasise the person, not the disability. It is widely believed that this word is derived from Victorian times, when many disabled people had to beg for money and so went "cap in hand"

Avoid: Victim / afflicted / suffering from a condition   **Use:** You should say 'a young person who has Down's Syndrome' or 'disabled young person'

Why? Disabled people usually don't feel that they 'suffer' from a condition/disability and you shouldn't make that assumption. This perpetuates the view that children or adults who have disabilities are victims that require pity, or who bear a burden caused by their impairment. The social model of disability believes that although individuals have impairments, it is society that disables them through the barriers that are placed physically, attitudinally, and socially. Use of terms such as victim or afflicted does not support the social model.

Avoid: Wheelchair bound/confined   **Use:** Uses a wheelchair / wheelchair user

Why? Confined and bound implies a negative and pitiful position. Most people who use a wheelchair do not regard them as confining. They are viewed as liberating.

Avoid: Deaf and dumb   **Use:** A deaf person, communication difficulties

Why? Most people with hearing impairments are capable of speech. The term 'dumb' should never be used to describe a child or young person.

Avoid: Normal, healthy (when used as the opposite of disabled)   **Use:** Non-disabled.

Why? This again supports the social model of disability. Use of normal implies that anyone who is different is therefore "abnormal" and promotes a negative self image and sets people apart from others.

Avoid: The deaf. The visually impaired. The disabled.   **Use:** A person who is deaf, disabled person, a person who has a disability etc

Why? It is important to say that a disabled person is still a person and is dehumanising. Otherwise this emphasises the disability and not the person.

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Avoid: Spastic, mong, retarded, deformed, defective, crippled, dumb, etc.

Use: When it is appropriate to refer to an individual's disability, choose the correct terminology for specific disability.

Why? These words are offensive, dehumanising, degrading and stigmatising. Use terms such as cerebral palsy, Down's Syndrome, learning disability, mental illness, spina bifida, quadriplegia, seizure disorder, speech impairment, specific learning disability etc

Avoid: SEND children/young people/learner/pupil or Down's baby/child/leaner etc

Use: Learner/pupil/child/young person with SEND.

Why? Never put the 'label' in front of the person.

Bullying language:

Whilst be do need young people to take responsibility for their actions we try to avoid labeling children and young people as 'bullies' or 'victims'. We do this for a number of reasons:

- You don't necessarily have all the facts around bullying incidents so to label children and young people may be inaccurate.
- It's not always straightforward bully/victim situation.
- To label a young person as a 'bully' could potentially be damaging. You are essentially saying that person is 'bad' and this is rarely the case for a young person.

Instead we say 'a pupil who has been bullied' or 'a pupil who has displayed bullying behaviour'

Further reading:

What to say/not to say – Down's Syndrome Association: http://www.downs-syndrome.org.uk/news-and-media/media-centre/what-to-say-not-say.html

The British Sociological Association: Equality and Diversity – non-disablist language http://www.britsoc.co.uk/equality/

This document forms part of a wider programme of training and resources aimed at reducing the incidence and impact of bullying of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities. You can find out more about the programme here: www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/send-programme

Achievement for All   anti-bullying alliance   contact a family for families with disabled children   Council for disabled children   mencap The voice of learning disability

SEN and disabilities: developing effective anti-bullying practice: A programme of work, led by the Anti-Bullying Alliance and funded by the Department for Education, to reduce the incidence and impact of bullying of children and young people with SEN and/or disabilities in schools.