



Language Usage and Terminology Guidelines

Words Matter. Words can open doors to cultivate the understanding and respect that enable people with disabilities to lead fuller, more independent lives. Words can also create barriers or stereotypes that are not only demeaning to people with disabilities, but also rob them of their individuality.

Special Olympics prefers to focus on people and their gifts and accomplishments and dispel negative attitudes and stereotypes. In an ideal world, labels would not exist, but unfortunately they do and language choices can have a powerful impact on impressions and attitudes. As language has evolved, Special Olympics has updated our official terminology to use more widely accepted terminology that is more acceptable to our athletes.

The following language guidelines have been developed by experts for use by anyone writing or speaking about people with intellectual disabilities to ensure that all people are portrayed with individuality and dignity.

Appropriate Terminology

SONH refers to participants first and foremost as athletes (Special Olympics New Hampshire athletes). For secondary reference, SONH refers to individuals, persons or people with intellectual disabilities.

Refer to participants in Special Olympics as “Special Olympics athletes” rather than “Special Olympians” or “Special Olympic athletes.” (Note that there is always an ‘s’ at the end of the word, “Olympics.”)

Use “people-first language.” Refer to individuals, persons or people with intellectual disabilities rather than “intellectually disabled people” or “the intellectually disabled.”

People have intellectual disabilities, rather than are “suffering from,” “afflicted with” or “victim of” intellectual disabilities.

Distinguish between adults and children with intellectual disabilities. Use adults or children, or older or younger athletes. Because Special Olympics athletes range in age from 8 to 80 years old, please do not refer to the athlete population as a whole as kids or any similar youth oriented term.

A person “uses” a wheelchair, rather than is “confined” or “restricted to” a wheelchair.

“Down syndrome” has replaced “Down’s syndrome” and “mongoloid.”

Refer to participants in Special Olympics as athletes. In no case should the word athletes appear in quotation marks or be capitalized.



When writing, refer to persons with a disability in the same style as persons without a disability: full name on first reference and last name on subsequent references. Do not refer to an individual with an intellectual disability as "Bill" rather than the journalistically correct "Bill Smith" or "Smith."

A person has a physical challenge instead of being crippled.

Use the words "Special Olympics" when referring to the worldwide Special Olympics movement but use the words "Special Olympics New Hampshire" when referring to a state competition or event happening locally.

Special Olympics New Hampshire is a year-round program with a variety of seasonal competitions and games. These events should be referred to by their official title, such as

- Special Olympics New Hampshire 2020 State Winter Games
- Special Olympics New Hampshire 2020 State Summer Games

Terminology to Avoid

Do not preface Special Olympics with the word "the." This implies that Special Olympics is a one-time, singular event rather than a year-round, ongoing program of sports training and competition.

Do not use the label "kids" when referring to Special Olympics athletes. Adult athletes are an integral part of the Movement.

Do not use the word "crippled" or "handicapped."

Do not use the adjective "unfortunate" when talking about people with intellectual disabilities.

Disabling conditions do not have to be life-defining in a negative way.

Do not sensationalize the accomplishments of persons with disabilities. While these accomplishments should be recognized and applauded, people in the disability rights movement have tried to make the public aware of the negative impact of referring to the achievements of people with physical or intellectual disabilities with excessive hyperbole.

Use the word "special" with extreme care when talking about persons with intellectual disabilities. The term, if used excessively in references to Special Olympics athletes and activities, can become a cliché.