



Talking and Thinking About Disability

This document covers two topics associated with disability. The first topic is about how to refer to someone who has a disability. The other topic is about different ways to define disability.

Person-First and Identity-First Language

Caring Across Cultures' materials use both person-first and identity-first language.

If you don't know what those terms mean, keep reading so you can learn.

If you **are** familiar with those two terms—and have a preference for one or the other—read on to understand our decision to use both.

What's The Difference?

The difference between these two ways of referring to a disabled person is whether the person or their disability is mentioned first.

Examples:

Person-first: The new library volunteer is an adult with autism.

Identity-first: The new library volunteer is an autistic adult.

Different Points of View

Why do people prefer person-first language?

Some people believe it's a way to show respect for someone who has a disability. Mentioning a person's disability after acknowledging that they are a person shifts the focus from the disability to the person. The

underlying message is, “I see you as a person first, who is not defined by your disability.”

Why do people prefer identity-first language?

First, they believe it’s not even possible to separate a person from their disability; it’s part of who they are. Second, is the belief that wanting to separate the two implies that the disability is something bad. Disability is viewed as a natural part of human diversity, and so we shouldn’t feel the need to draw attention away from it.

Caring Across Cultures uses both person-first and identity-first language to acknowledge that neither one is preferred by everybody. It’s a personal choice.

Discuss Preferences

To avoid a potential conflict over person-first or identity-first language, a direct care worker can ask their employer what their preference is. This shows the employer that they want to be respectful. And it gives the worker a little insight into their employer’s self-identity. Alternatively, the employer may choose to simply state their preference during the interview process.

If this kind of conversation doesn’t take place before a conflict arises, it’s important to respond with respect and without judgment.

Show Respect

If you find out that you have a different preference than someone else, talk about it with curiosity. Find out what experiences or values shaped their opinion. It’s a chance to understand the other person’s perspective.

If you don't have a preference, respect the other person by using their preference for person-first or identity-first language.

Models of Disability

We look at three models of disability. Each model has a different idea about what causes disability.

Medical Model

Question: What causes disability?

Answer: A medical condition of a person's body or mind causes disability. The condition makes completing some activities and interacting with other people more difficult. This model views disability as something wrong with a person.

Social Model

Question: What causes disability?

Answer: The poor design of public spaces causes disability. If public spaces were designed with all people in mind, no one would be denied access. This model views disability as something wrong with the physical environment—a failure on society's part.

Moral Model

Question: What causes disability?

Answer: A person's character, actions, or karma causes disability. With this model, disability might be seen as punishment for wrongdoing by the person (or their family). Or, it can be seen as a sign of honor or faith.