Person First
Recognizing the Person First, Then the Disability or Difference

It's the Person First, Then the Disability or Difference
When someone seems different from you, it's pretty easy to focus on what sets them apart. Maybe it's how they look or speak. But think about it:

Do differences define the person?

Suppose you were the only one who failed a math test.

Would you want to be called "the math failure"?

Wouldn't it be more accurate to say you were "the person who failed the math test yesterday"?

Your grade isn't who you are; it's one small thing about you.

Every person is made up of many characteristics and abilities—but few people want to be identified only by those things. That's true whether it's their grade on a math test, their ability to play tennis, or their love for fried onions.

Everyone is a person first. It's like that with disabilities, too.

Here are some cool ways to "put the person first" when talking about people with disabilities.

1. Speak of the person first, then the disability.
Say: person with a disability
Instead of: disabled or handicapped person
Say: people with disabilities
Instead of: the disabled

Other examples:
Say: person with cognitive delays
Instead of: mentally retarded person or retard
Say: person who is deaf or hard of hearing
Instead of: deaf person
Say: person with Down syndrome (not "Down's")
Instead of: Retard
Say: person with a physical disability
Instead of: crippled person

2. Emphasize abilities, not limitations.
Focus on what someone can do, not what they cannot do.

3. Don't give excessive praise or attention to a person with a disability.
Over-focusing on someone can be patronizing.

4. Remember that choice and independence are important.
Let the person do or speak for him or herself as much as possible.

5. Know the difference between a disability and a handicap.
A disability is a functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability to walk, hear, talk, learn, etc. A handicap is a situation or barrier imposed by society, the environment, or oneself.

The next time you see a person in a wheelchair unable to go up the stairs in a building, what will you see first? The wheelchair? The physical problem? The person?

Will you say, "There is a handicapped person unable to find a ramp?" Or will you say "There is a person with a disability who is handicapped by an inaccessible building?"

So, if you do all that and "put the person first," do you know what people will say?
"Now there goes a person who is way cool."