



## Words matter

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

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.

Why did Special Olympics update its terminology from “mental retardation” to “intellectual disabilities”? In response to a call from our athletes and the growing socially unacceptable use of the term “mental retardation” around the world, Special Olympics has adopted the term “intellectual disabilities” when referring to the people with whom we serve. The word “mental” can be confused with the term “mental illness” and the word “retardation” is associated with offensive terms such as “retard” or “retarded.”

## Appropriate Terminology

Why is language and specific terminology important? Special Olympics prefers to focus on people and their gifts and accomplishments, and to 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 its official terminology to use more widely accepted terminology that is more acceptable to our athletes.

- Special Olympics uses the term “intellectual disabilities.” Other terms are used around the world.
- 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 “a victim of” intellectual disabilities.
- Distinguish between adults and children with intellectual disabilities. Use adults or children, or older or younger athletes.
- A person “uses” a wheelchair, rather than is “confined” or “restricted to” a wheelchair.
- A person is physically challenged or disabled rather than crippled.”
- “Down syndrome” has replaced “Down’s Syndrome” and “mongoloid.”



## Appropriate Terminology Continued

- Refer to participants in Special Olympics as “Special Olympics athletes” rather than “Special Olympians” or “Special Olympic athletes.”
- Refer to participants in Special Olympics as athletes. In no case should the word athletes appear in quotation marks.
- Use the words “Special Olympics” when referring to the worldwide Special Olympics movement.

## Terminology to Avoid

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