



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.

## **Appropriate Terminology**

- Special Olympics uses the term **“intellectual disabilities.”**  
The term “mental retardation” has been used in the past, and other terms are used around the world. However, we have found that the term intellectual disabilities is the language our athletes prefer and is the least offensive to them.
- Refer to participants in Special Olympics as “Special Olympics athletes.”  
Do not use the term “Special Olympians.” Special Olympics’ agreement with the International Olympic Committee, the group that organizes the modern Olympic Games, allows for the usage of the term Special Olympics but prohibits our use of the word “Olympian.” Also, participants in Special Olympics are athletes—the word alone should never appear in quotation marks.
- Use **“people-first language.”**  
Refer to individuals, persons or people with intellectual disabilities, rather than “intellectually disabled people” or “the intellectually disabled.” In addition, it is important to point out that people **have intellectual disabilities**, rather than are “suffering from,” “afflicted with” or “a victim of” intellectual disabilities.
- Not all participants are kids.  
**Special Olympics Indiana participants range in age from eight years old to more than 88 years old. Distinguish between adults and children** with intellectual disabilities. Use adults or children, or older or younger athletes.
- Some participants also have physical disabilities.  
Many of our athletes are physically challenged or disabled, but you should never use the term “crippled.” Also, a person “uses” a wheelchair, brace, flotation device or other specialized equipment rather than is “confined,” “bound” or “restricted to” their use.
- 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.”
- Use the words **“Special Olympics”** when referring to the worldwide Special Olympics Movement only. Special Olympics events have specific names such as Summer Games or EKS Games.

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## Terminology to Avoid

- Under no circumstances is it ever appropriate to use the “r-word” meaning “retard” or “retarded.” Unfortunately, this word has become a part of many people’s daily vernacular. Special Olympics Indiana is part of a nation-wide campaign to “Spread the Word to End the Word,” inviting all people to change the conversation and stop using the r-word.
- Do not use the label “**kids**” when referring to Special Olympics athletes. Adult athletes are an integral part of Special Olympics.
- 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.



## **Pledge to Show Respect to Everyone. Don't use the r-word.**

**ACCEPTANCE**  
**PASSION** Be a fan of **RESPECT** **UNITY**  
**HUMANITY**

