

Special Olympics Colorado



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 also can 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 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, Inc. (headquarters) and Special Olympics programs have updated their 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

- Special Olympics Colorado (SOCO) refers to participants first and foremost as athletes (Special Olympics Colorado athletes). For secondary reference, SOCO 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 “a victim of” intellectual disabilities.
- Distinguish between adults and children with intellectual disabilities. Use adults or children, or older or younger athletes. REMEMBER: Special Olympics athletes range in age from 8 to 80 years old. Therefore, 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.
- 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 a intellectual disability as “Bill” rather than the journalistically correct “Bill Smith” or “Smith.”
- A person is physically challenged or disabled rather than crippled.
- Use the words “Special Olympics” when referring to the worldwide Special Olympics movement but use the words “Special Olympics Colorado” when referring to a state competition or event happening locally.
- Special Olympics Colorado 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 Colorado 2008 Winter Games
 - Special Olympics Colorado 2008 Summer Classic



Special Olympics Colorado



TERMINOLOGY GUIDELINES continued...

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.



In the context of Special Olympics, the term “intellectual disabilities” is a synonym for mental retardation (as well as developmental disabilities). Therefore, Special Olympics uses the definition of intellectual disabilities/mental retardation provided by the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations’ specialized agency for health. According to the WHO, intellectual disability is a condition of arrested or incomplete development of the mind characterized by impairment of skills and overall intelligence in areas such as cognition, language, and motor and social abilities. Intellectual disability can occur with or without any other physical or mental disorders. Although reduced level of intellectual functioning is the characteristic feature of this disorder, the diagnosis is made only if it is associated with a diminished ability to adapt to the daily demands of the normal social environment. Visit www.who.int for more information.



Updated July 2007