

DSRF Preferred Language Guide

There has been a positive cultural shift in how we use language and labels to identify people with disabilities, and DSRF is proud to be part of this shift. We are committed to continuing to learn, adapt and amplify the voices of the community we serve.

This Canadian-based guide provides updated recommendations on language to use and to avoid when speaking with clinicians, medical professionals, and members of the general public. We hope this guide can also be used to reflect upon the terms you currently use, and encourage you to make changes within yourself and your communities.

Guiding Principles

Person-first language is preferred when speaking with clinicians, medical professionals, and members of the general public.

The Down Syndrome Resource Foundation strongly condemns the use of the word “retarded” in any context. This is a hurtful term with a long and painful history.

Every community, including the Down syndrome community, is made up of individuals who have their own unique preferences on language and how they identify. If you are unsure of someone’s preferred language, follow their lead and use the language they are using. Some people with Down syndrome tell us they prefer terms like “special needs” or identity-first language such as, “I’m a Down syndrome guy.” If you are unsure, ask. Invite people to share how they would like to be referred to by saying, “Tell me about yourself and how you would like to be described.” Ultimately, the very best practice is to honour each individual’s preference.

Language to avoid	Language to use
Down’s syndrome; Downs	Down syndrome; Trisomy 21
Down syndrome person/child*; “he has Down’s;” ‘Downies;’ ‘a Down;’ mongoloid	Person with Down syndrome; person with Trisomy 21
Suffers from; afflicted by; stricken by; troubled with	Has Down syndrome
Normal; regular; healthy	Neurotypical; typically developing
Mental retardation; handicapped; brain damaged	Person with intellectual disabilities
Disease; disorder	Condition; syndrome
Can’t talk; non-verbal	Non-speaking; person who uses alternative communication
Pejorative diagnostic categories: idiot; moron; imbecile; retard	Mild, moderate, severe and profound intellectual disability
High functioning/low functioning	High/low support needs
Differently abled; special needs*	Has a disability

*When we polled DSRF students, they preferred these terms; use these terms if given permission by someone with Down syndrome.