VANDERBILT KENNEDY CENTER

Person First Vs. Identify First

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What is the difference between using person-first vs. identity-first language and does it matter? This tip sheet is designed to explain the scenarios in which both languages are used as well as their impact on the autistic community.

- ❑ **We recognize the words we use to describe and define individuals and groups of people are powerful.**
  In TRIAD's work within school-age services we often use identity-first language ("autistic person," rather than "person with autism") which is preferred by many autistic people, **including TRIAD's autistic advisors**. *This is in recognition that identity-first language is a growing and important part of autism culture as it more directly appreciates the value and worth of autistic persons by acknowledging autism as a central part of identity.*

> "On a personal level, identity-first language is extremely important to me. I know that my autism is responsible for my gifts, my talents, my deficits, and most of all, my personhood. It is an integral part of who I am, and as part of my autonomy, I claim it as a significant part of my identity."
>
> *~Emelyne Bingham, self-advocate*

We strive to meet autistic learners (as well as their families and service providers) where they are to help them gain skills for supporting their ability to contact and maintain self-determined success, happiness, and joy.

TRIAD often uses person-first language in formal publications or other mediums, in which only person-first language is allowed. Additionally, person-first language is often used within diagnostic encounters with children and caregivers. However, we continue to challenge such rules to the extent it may help us reflect greater respect for autistic communities.

TRIAD uses identity-first language throughout their toolkits and tip sheets intended for educators and professionals working with autistics students as well as caregivers. It is also used when communicating with autistic individuals, caregivers, families, and educators. For more information on identity-first language, visit: triad.vumc.org/identity-language.

❑ **Let's look at the reasonings people use both person-first language (PFL) and identity-first language (IFL).**

	Person-First Language (Person with autism)	Identity-First Language (Autistic person)
Why do people use it?	Recognizes them as a person instead of a disability/condition. Puts the person before the disability. Individuals may want to be seen as more than their autism and therefore prefer PFL.	Recognizes, affirms, and validates a person's identity as an autistic person. Shows that we are not afraid of or ashamed to recognize, celebrate, and value neurodivergence in individuals. Individuals may view autism as an inherent part of their identity and therefore prefer IFL.
When do people use it?	The standard for diagnostic materials and formal publications is PFL. There was a history in which IFL was considered taboo/offensive and therefore some people may still feel more comfortable using PFL.	Autistic self-advocates often communicate a preference for IFL. Some formal publications (e.g., Autism in Adulthood) recommend using IFL or neutral terminology (e.g., "on the autism spectrum).
What does the autism community say about it?	Suggests that person can be separated from disability. This is not only inaccurate but can be considered offensive as it makes it seem like autism is holding that person back from being viewed like everyone else.	Autism is lifelong and not a disease that can be cured. "Autistic" is not a bad or offensive word.

> "I think the person-first vs. identity-first controversy could be solved if we simply respected preferences"
>
> *~Dave Caudel, self-advocate*

❑ **Summary:**

When discussing autism, it is important to respect the preferences of the individual (and/or caregivers). If there is not a strong preference, *the autistic community recommends using identity-first language or the more neutral term "on the (autism) spectrum". It is crucial to take a non-judgmental and person-centered approach.*

❑ **Additional Resources:**

- » Avoiding Ableist Language: Suggestions for Autism Researchers
- » Does Language Matter? Identity-First Versus Person-First Language Use in Autism Research: A Response to Vivanti
- » "It Defines Who I Am" or "It's Something I Have": What Language Do [Autistic] Australian Adults [on the Autism Spectrum] Prefer?
- » Stigma, Incommensurability, or Both? Pathology-First, Person-First, and Identity-First Language and the Challenges of Discourse in Divided Autism Communities
- » Talking About Autism-Thoughts for Researchers
- » Which Terms Should Be Used to Describe Autism? Perspectives From the UK Autism Community

This resource was created with direction, input, and feedback from TRIAD's Advisory Committee. For more information about this committee, please visit our website on Community Informed Practice.