# Talking the Talk |eLearning (Transcript)

Good day, everyone! So glad to see you in this e-learning video on the importance of language. My name is Leanne Fenez and I work for Abilities Manitoba.

Today we are going to dive into why the language we use matters and how we can use our words to lift people up or tear them down.

In our video about Nurturing Relationships, Natalie shared the quote from John O'Brien that says "The quality of our lives depends upon the quality of our introductions & invitations." What exactly does this mean?

Well, imagine if you will that you meet a neighbour on the street while out for a walk with someone you support. You greet the stranger and say "Hi, I'm Leanne, nice to meet you. Oh, this is Eddie, I work with him at his group home. "

Now let's explore a different way that that introduction might have gone... "Hi, nice to meet you. This is Ed, he's your neighbour and as you can see, he is an avid Jets fan! (As you point to his Jets shirt.) I'm Leanne.

Better yet... perhaps you stand back and have Ed introduce himself if he is comfortable doing that!

Can you see the difference? Word's matter! The way you talk to and about the people you support is very important. Everyday whether you are aware of it or not, your words translate or interpret people's value. Others take their cue from you. If you use devaluing or stigmatizing language, not only do they go away believing that that is OK. But it also reinforces or creates a negative opinion of that person or perhaps even anyone who has a disability! You can enhance people or you can devalue. Words give or take away power.

Let's go back to our neighbour on the street... the first introduction serves to set Ed apart, to "other" him as someone who lives in a group home. It focuses on you as the support worker and your role and provides no information from which a natural conversation is likely to evolve. Also, unless "Eddie" is Ed's preferred name that he has expressly asked you to introduce him as, child-like nicknames only serve to reinforce negative stereotypes.

The second introduction puts Ed in the forefront and identifies areas of common interest. The passerby now knows that Ed is their neighbour and a hockey fan which provides a topic for future conversation. The information provided identifies Ed as someone who is more like his neighbour than he is different and makes it more likely that a relationship would develop.

Alright, hopefully that example helps illustrate the importance... now let's dive into a very brief overview of some things to consider when choosing your words.

The language we use is evolving. And thank goodness for that! What was thought to be respectful language 20 to 30 years ago is language we might gasp at today!  And yet even today we all say things that may need some rethinking.

For the longest time, we've been encouraged to use person-first language as a respectful way to describe people. This puts the word person first before any reference to disability is made and acknowledges that human beings who have disabilities, are in fact people first. For example, you might say, person with Down Syndrome or person with cerebral palsy. The logic here is that disability is something a person has, rather than who they are, so by separating any mention of disability from the person and putting it second, you're are showing that you respect the personhood of someone with a disability. Seems straightforward right!?

But wait! More recently, we are discovering that perhaps not everyone who lives with a disability wants to be identified in this way rather they may want identity-first language which puts their disability first in their descriptor. This is all about acknowledging that disability is part of what makes a person who they are. So we

might say - Disabled person, blind person, autistic people. In this case, disability isn't just a description or diagnosis; it's an identity that connects people to a shared community, culture and history.

For example, people in the autistic community often indicate that being autistic is part of their personality, culture and is inseparable from who they are. Thus, they embrace and prefer the label of "autistic" rather than a person with "autism".

We are also seeing that just as the LGBTQ community took back certain words that previously may have been meant as insults, people with disabilities too may choose to use words that may be perceived as provocative or insulting. For example, Disability Awareness Consultant, Drew Gurza refers to himself as a Queer Cripple.

We could spend quite a bit of time talking about the difference between person-first and identity-first language but the important thing to remember is we need to seek to understand how the person prefers to describe themselves and take our lead from them.  So, ask the person what their preferences are – including their name, their personal pronouns, people first or identity first, and their communication styles. The choices that people with disabilities make about how to describe and define themselves are deeply personal and each may have their

own preference.  And hey, if you don't have the opportunity to find out directly from the person, use Person First language as a default until you hear otherwise.

Alright, now for my top 10 tips for respectful language, Ready?

#1) Use strength based, supportive and image enhancing language when describing what you do – telling others you provide personal care to someone is not really image enhancing. While telling others you support people to gain education, experience and exposure to an array of life's opportunities sounds pretty cool and interesting!

 #2) Remember you don't own people – I often hear folks talk about people they work with as "my guys", "my clients" or describe their workplace as "my home". Where else would we use this type of possessive language outside of our own family?? Why we do think it's OK to use when talking about people you support?

#3) Avoid statements like we "allow" people to do that. People's right to choose and control their lives is fundamental and non-negotiable. You don't allow people to do anything.

#4) Some words are offensive no matter what. Like the R-word to describe people with intellectual disabilities or the M-word to describe people who have dwarfism.

#5) Remember what we don't say matters too – aspirations, dreams, and expectations are shaped by our words. When we don't ask people with disabilities about whether they have jobs, university degrees, children or spouses... how are we shaping the expectations and understanding of all those involved.

#6) Never refer to someone by their mobility equipment such as that wheelchair can fit over here, or I'll go ask the wheelchair guy. Instead use Wheelchair user or person who uses a wheelchair – a person is a person not a piece of equipment. Also, people are not confined or bound to their wheelchair... In fact, a wheelchair enables movement and does not confine or bind.

#7) Avoid euphemisms for disability such as special needs, physically challenged, differently-abled, exceptional etc.  - there is nothing wrong with being disabled and trying to change the word and/or avoid saying it, tells others you think there is. Terms like differently-abled and exceptional are typically well intended at least on the surface. But they are so obviously an effort to be kind or nice or positive and cheerleading that the effect is sentimental and condescending. It also denies

the reality of disability as a meaningful concept or experience. (The only time you should use these terms is if the person expressly asks you to.) Other words to avoid... "Normal" – what is normal? – all our bodies and brains work in different ways – consider using "neurotypical", "does not have a disability", or "able-bodied". Avoid "low functioning", "high functioning" – if you need to distinguish at all – simply identify clearly what the person requires in terms of support. Or "person who is able to or unable to"… Avoid the outdated term "handicapped" and refer to parking spots and washrooms as "accessible".

#8) Avoid using words that historically or currently describe people with disability, as insults. When we use disabilities in a negative way, we perpetuate harmful stereotypes. So, using words like insane, crazy, lame, idiot, gimp, spaz to put down others devalues people with disabilities as well!

#9) Stop using different language for people we serve than you would for yourself? Examples?? We say people go on 'outings', they spend time in 'program', they elope or go AWOL, or they are non-compliant. These are all words that we would never use to describe identical activities or responses if we were referring to ourselves. When we use these words, it is another way we set people apart or 'other' them. And what about using the words "individual" or

"participant" - I hear these words often to describe people who are receiving organizational supports. My recommendation is that you label staff, family and every one else if you must distinguish for clarity. But unless you are indeed talking about someone's individuality or participation in an event, using these words to only refer to people with disabilities is simply creating another devalued label and again sets them apart.

And my final language tip:

#10) Describing a person with a disability as courageous or special or an inspiration, because they have overcome their disability implies that it is unusual for people with disabilities to have skills and talents and to contribute to society. This perpetuate the idea that disability is a negative thing.

Alright, so many of these words are embedded in our language and so it takes active practice and conscious effort to break away from using them. Pay attention and if you make a mistake, give yourself some grace, apologize to anyone you might have offended and try to do better next time.

The importance placed on valued, respectful, strength based and status enhancing language when talking with and about people with disability can't be understated. Language demonstrates respect – deep respect – the words we

choose show that we presume competence and believe people can grow and develop.

Mark Twain once said "the difference between the almost right word and the right word is a large matter, tis the difference between the lightning bug and lightning".

So as I leave you today, I ask that you take a few minutes to reflect and evaluate your word choices and language. What can you do differently tomorrow that will build people up and translates your deep respect and appreciation for their contribution? Thanks for listening and take good care!