



LANGUAGE MATTERS: A Reflection on the Critical Use of Language

Introduction and Purpose

The START ASD 365: Inclusion and Equity Every Day campaign was formed in the spring of 2021 in response to the need for greater intention regarding neurodiversity, inclusivity, equity, and acceptance of autistic individuals as part of our society. **START is committed to the ongoing provision of reliable resources that represent diverse perspectives in order to encourage conversations that move us toward authentic inclusivity.** A key factor of this work is language.

Language reflects our society and thus has the ability to reinforce inequitable practices and power structures (Broughton et al., 2021). By acknowledging the influence of language, we create a critical awareness and understanding of the impact of language as a powerful tool in the theory of change (Thomas & Hirsch, 2016).

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Language also creates perceptions, shifts perspectives, and evokes deep emotion. Language is not stagnant. It is critical to be informed and sensitive to language preferences. **These factors have guided our efforts, leading us to intentionally alternate terminology throughout our writing. In this manner, we strive to reach and respect all who interact with this work.** For example, the use of person-first language ("child with autism") and identity-first language ("autistic child") is evolving and preferences for this terminology vary among self-advocates, families, and organizations.

The purpose of this document is to encourage thoughtful reflection on the critical use of language. The information provided here is intended to invite open discussion regarding how language is (and is not) used, has been used, and could be used (Thomas & Hirsch, 2016). This is not intended to be an exhaustive list as language is continually evolving and does not always capture the nuances of individual experiences. The explanations and definitions below are not meant to place a value on anyone's personal choice of language since terms related to oneself are an individual preference.



We invite reflection and discussion regarding the use of language that may lead to discomfort or exclusion of others no matter how subtle. We are committed to updating this information as language and our learning evolves.

Asset-Based

The language we use can intentionally or unintentionally influence the perceptions and attitudes of those around us. Deficit-based language and thinking places blame on the individual, highlights shortcomings, and focuses on what is wrong. It emphasizes deficiencies, problems, or limitations. The focus is on areas of need or what should be fixed or changed. Deficit-based language also promotes negative stereotypes and preconceived notions for certain groups of people.

Asset-based approaches, however, build on strengths and attributes which are already present. When emphasizing an asset-based approach we promote a growth mindset, establish expectations for success, and emphasize independence and empowerment. Asset-based thinking and language can shape our core values which are important for positive perspectives and behaviors and can impact how we attend to the needs of the whole person and community (Dinishak, 2016; Wellborn & Lindsey, 2020).

The benefits of promoting an asset-based model of communication include increased respect for diversity across cultures, languages, disabilities, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. **Asset-based communication broadens perspectives in classrooms and communities, enriching our own thinking and behaviors.** By using specific terminology to interact with students, families, and those in our communities, we have the opportunity to engage in more meaningful conversations, encourage closer relationships, and promote greater inclusiveness.

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Suggested Activities and References

| Asset-Based | Deficit-Based |
|---|--|
| Using evidence-based strategies for students with ASD can improve communication | Students with ASD have deficits which make it difficult to communicate |
| Students with ASD benefit from obtaining work-based experiences | Student is not ready for work |
| We need to make sure the student understands the behavioral expectations | The student is doing that on purpose |
| The student benefits from functional communication training | The student's parents reinforced these behaviors |
| Differentiating instruction based on the student's strengths may be beneficial | The student doesn't get it |
| Reinforce effort ("I love how you're sitting with feet on the floor") | I'm not reinforcing the student for what they should be doing. |
| The student is sensitive to loud noises (headphones may help with the sound or "I know noises bother you, would you like some headphones or is there something else that helps?") | They are on sensory overload |

Ableist Language

The term “ableism” is defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary as “the unfair treatment of people because they have a disability” and includes any statement or behavior directed at a person with a disability that denigrates or assumes a lesser status for the person because of their disability. In essence, it centers around the belief that “typical” abilities are superior and that disabled people are imperfect, need fixing, and are less valuable to society, potentially discounting and negating the perspectives and interests of disabled persons.

Ableism (<http://gvsu.edu/s/1YX>) can be reflected in personal beliefs and behaviors, while systemic ableism refers to the inequity disabled people experience as a result of laws and policy. Segregation and restrictive practices that are meant to protect and support people with disabilities often reflect a societal belief that people with disabilities are less competent and should therefore have less personal independence and more protection from risk than is generally afforded to people of the same age.

Ableist actions and language are found everywhere, [including at school \(http://gvsu.edu/s/1YY\)](http://gvsu.edu/s/1YY). **Ableist language is any word or phrase that devalues disabled persons.** These words and phrases are used every day without a realization of the harm they do, often showing up in the form of metaphors and euphemisms. For example, someone may “turn a blind eye” to a problem or describe a new movie as “crazy” or “insane.” According to Novic (2021), ableist language “is often not a conscious attempt to harm disabled people, but it acts to construct a world-view in which existing as a disabled person is [negative].”

Listening to disabled people, avoiding assumptions, asking questions, presuming competence, and educating oneself are effective ways to begin to [combat ableism and increase inclusivity \(http://gvsu.edu/s/1YZ\)](http://gvsu.edu/s/1YZ).

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| Non-Ableist | Ableist |
|--|--|
| "Kiddos" when referring to all children or all students | "Kiddos" or "our kids" when referring to students with disabilities only |
| They left the classroom; They bit a classmate | They are a "runner;" They are a "biter" |
| Disabled person, Person with a disability, Student with an IEP | "Different" ability, "Special" needs, "Specially abled" |
| Neurodivergent, Neurodiverse | Normal, Abnormal |
| <p>Describe the specific skills and strengths, e.g., strong expressive language skills, excels at grade-level math, seeks out social interactions, communicates using an AAC device</p> <p>"Higher support needs" and specifying the specific support needs, such as differentiation of curricular materials in math</p> | <p>"High-functioning" - Deficit model that limits struggles; can make it harder to be validated; can lead to masking</p> <p>"Low-functioning" - Deficit model that limits strengths; can result in being spoken over and viewed as incapable</p> <p>These terms are a deficit model.</p> |
| Understanding dignity of risk | Hovering, protecting, and restricting opportunities for students with disabilities |
| Presume competence | Presume person needs help and support |
| They are autistic | They are suffering from autism |

People-First and Identity-First

The use of identity-first language, in which the disability precedes the person (“autistic child”), and person-first language, in which the individual is placed in front of their disability (“student with autism”), is a topic of discussion spanning professional communities, personal conversations, and social media. While there is a preference for identity-first language by a number of autistic self-advocates, families, and advocacy organizations, there are just as many individuals with autism, families, and organizations that prefer person-first language. Whenever possible, ask the individual or a family member what they prefer.

To honor preferences, consider using a mix of terminology in your verbal and written communication, unless you know the preferences of an individual or group. This would include intermixing the use of person-first and identity-first terminology both within a sentence and across sentences. For example, if you are designing a training flyer, you might use this language:

On Monday, March 7, we are providing a 2-hour training to the community about the strengths and needs of individuals with autism seeking employment. In this presentation, you will hear from autistic young adults and their family members, as well as school professionals.

Given that this flyer will be disseminated to a large group for which we do not know preferences, this mixing of language demonstrates a respect for the different ways individuals & families identify with autism.

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| Student with an IEP | Disabled student |
| Student with autism | Autistic student |
| Adult with autism | Autistic adult |
| They are living with autism | They are autistic |
| I am a person with autism | I am autistic |
| Individual who thinks differently | Neurodivergent thinker |

Terminology from the Autism Community

One function of language is to express our internal experiences that are not readily visible to others. **The autistic community has developed terms to use in their daily lives to help explain to themselves and others why they are feeling the way they do.** Understanding this terminology is an important aspect of understanding autism culture and how autistics live their lives.

Some terms may be confusing to those who are not familiar with them, which provides the opportunity for autistic individuals to learn to self-advocate. **Self-advocacy gives many disabled people, autistic individuals included, the chance for their voices to be heard.**

In the autism community, there are both "formal" and "informal" terms. "Formal" terms, such as "executive dysfunction/function," are linked to scientific research and have been adopted by the autism community.

Informal words such as "autie," short for "autistic person," and "infodump," the act of oversharing one's special interest without pause, are not commonly used in formal language. This "informal" terminology is not exclusive to the autism community, as those affiliated with autism and the autism community are welcome to use the words. The distinctness of these terms creates an opportunity for them to be used within academic research and within the daily life of those with autism and their loved ones.

Allistic: Non-autistic people or people without autism.

Autie: Short for "autistic person."

Autistic burnout: When an autistic individual masks too long that it impacts their ability to do necessary skills and abilities. It can last a few days to a few months, or even years.

Elopement: Leaving without permission or leaving without anyone knowing. Autistic people are more likely to run off without understanding the danger.

Hyperfocus: Focusing on one thing and tuning out other things.

Info dumping: The act of oversharing one's special interest, without pause and awareness in the conversation.

Masking: When an autistic individual hides their autism traits and pretends to be a neurotypical.

Neurodivergent: People who have one or more neurodiverse conditions that represent variations in the areas of mood, social skills, learning style, attention, cognition, and concentration, including autism, ADHD, dyslexia, OCD, bipolar disorder, among others.

Neurodiversity: Neurodiversity is the idea that people experience and interact in the world in different ways and this is part of normal variation in the human population with no established right or wrong way of thinking, acting, or learning.

Neurotypical: People who don't have an autism diagnosis or any type of neurobiological difference such as ADHD, ADD, Dyslexia, among others.

Pressure stimming: Stimming, but with pressure. Generally a hug machine, weighted blanket, or a hug.

Same foods: Food that is eaten every day, or almost every day; food/diet of autistic people who eat the same things every day.

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Scripting: Repetition of words, phrases, or sounds. Older autistics, especially women (or female-presenting) tend to script often in social settings.

Sensory hell: When a sensory object or overwhelming environment makes an autistic person feel uncomfortable.

Sensory overload: When sensory information is too much and overloads the brain, potentially causing a meltdown or shutdown.

Special interest: An interest that an autistic individual has that they focus on intensely.

Stim/ming: Repetitive movements or sounds made to help autistic people calm down.

Time blindness: Being unaware of the passing of time.

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Self-advocacy gives many disabled people, autistic individuals included, the chance for their voices to be heard.

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Suggested Activities

- [Critical Language Reflection](#)
- [Social Identity Wheel Activity](#)
- [Asset-Based Approach Activities](#)

Visit <http://gvsu.edu/s/1Zm> to view all activities.

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