



Stop Special: Let's Get the Word Out!

Learning Module & Resource Guide for Educators

1 About the Stop Special Campaign

Words matter – our language can empower, respect, and uplift those around us. Yet many words used to describe people with disabilities frequently support negative stereotypes. The term 'special' is increasingly considered condescending and offensive. Calling disabled people 'special' sets them apart and implies that someone is somehow broken, less than, or deficient. Changing the words you use to describe disability takes time and practice.

Words to use instead of 'special needs':

- Person with a disability
- Disabled person
- Child/student with a disability
- Disabled child

Example: My friend has a disability.

Words to use instead of 'special education':

- Student with disabilities or just 'student'
- Education, appropriate education, equitable education, the education of students with disabilities
- Student who qualifies for supports and services under the IDEA, student with an IEP
- Student with a 504 plan, accommodations for students with disabilities

Under both the IDEA and Section 504, students are entitled to a free appropriate public education or FAPE. Therefore, what students are required to receive is not 'special,' but rather an 'appropriate' education.

Example: Students with disabilities who receive services under the IDEA or accommodations under Section 504 are entitled to an appropriate education based on their specific needs.

2 Learning Module

What are appropriate and respectful ways to define/describe/discuss students with disabilities/disabled students?

- Student with disabilities? Disabled student? Student with special needs?
- What words do you use and why?

As a result of this learning module, how might the words that your students use change?

Review the Resource Library in Section 3. Each resource is informed by diverse disability communities and addresses the language of disability. Choose resources that are age-appropriate and have your students discuss them in small groups and then share with the larger class what they learned.

- Break students into groups of around 4
- Assign each small group 3 different age-appropriate resources to review
 - 1 Stop Special quote from StopSpecial.org
 - 1 Stop Special video from StopSpecial.org
 - 1 additional resource from the Resource Library in Section 3
- Give students around 15-20 minutes to review materials in their small group and identify key points together.
- Have class come together as whole for a larger discussion.
 - Have someone from each group share the key points their group identified and discuss them as a class.
- Additional Discussion Questions:
 - What words do your students like to use to describe themselves and why? Maintain a safe space where those who want to share their words can, while others can keep their words to themselves. Write some of the words down on chalk/white board.
 - What words have they not liked being called? How did it make them feel when they were called things they didn't like?
 - Why don't people with disabilities want to be called 'special'?
 - What words can be used instead of 'special' or 'special needs'? Write their answers on the chalk/white board.
 - Bonus Question: What is ableism?
- Wrap-up:
 - How do your students want to make others feel and how might they do that through the words they use?

3 Resource Library

Language Guides

- [Words Matter](#), Disability RAPP Sheet
- [Ableist Words and Terms to Avoid](#), Lydia X. Z. Brown

News Articles & Blogs

- [Why “Special Needs” is Not Helpful](#), Rebecca Cokley
- [Here Are Some Dos And Don'ts Of Disability Language](#), Andrew Pulrang, Forbes
- [‘I am not ashamed’: Disability advocates, experts implore you to stop saying ‘special needs’](#), USA Today
- [Four Disability Euphemisms That Need to Bite the Dust](#), Emily Ladau, Center for Disability Rights
- [The Harmful Reality of Disability Euphemisms: Why You Shouldn't Use Phrases like “Special Needs”](#), Katie Carr, The Nora Project
- [Three Reasons to Say “Disability” Instead of “Special Needs”](#), Meriah Nichols

Books

- [Demystifying Disability](#), Emily Ladau
- [Don't Call Me Special: A First Look at Disability](#), Pat Thomas

Research

- [Choosing Words for Talking About Disability \(page 15\)](#), American Psychological Association, Dunn D, Andrews E
- [“Special Needs” is an ineffective euphemism](#), Gernsbacher MA, Raimond AR, Balinghasay MT, Boston JS

Twitter Feeds

- #SayTheWord
- #DisabilityNotVoldemort
- #WhenICallMyselfDisabled

Videos

- [Difference and disability language: Dos and don'ts](#) (13 seconds)
- [We don't need ‘special needs’ as a euphemism for disabled #disability](#) (30 seconds)
- [#WhenICallMyselfDisabled: The Power of Language and Identity](#) (2.5 minutes)