

Research Recap: Avoiding Ableist Language

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Ableism is discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities and people perceived as disabled. Ableism characterizes people as defined by their disabilities as inferior to people without an identified disability. It's important that professionals understand what ableism is, reflect on the language they use in their communication, and use non-ableist language alternatives to describe autism and autistic people.

Language and meanings are constantly evolving, what appears in the table below as recommendations may be inappropriate in some current or future contexts. Ableist discourses are not always reducible to terminology, so it would be possible to avoid using any of the terms in the table that are recommended against and still be perpetuating ableism through language choices.



* <https://awnnetwork.org/from-ableist-to-self-advocate/>

Potentially Ableist Terms/ Discourses and Suggested Alternatives	
Current Ableist Terms	Suggested Alternatives
Special interests	Focused or passionate interest, areas of interest or expertise
Special needs	Describe the specific needs of the individual
Challenging behavior, disruptive behavior, problem behavior, abnormal behavior	Specific description of their behavior (flapping, bumping, stimming, meltdowns, self-injurious)
High/Low functioning	Describe the individual's strengths and needs, acknowledge the level of support needed
At risk for autism	Increase likelihood, chance of autism
Suffers from autism	Has autism, is autistic
Comorbid (unless used in a medical or diagnostic setting)	Co-occurring
Autism symptoms	Describe their characteristics, features, traits
Treatment	Support, services, educational strategies
Normal, typical kids, healthy	Neurotypical, nonautistic, individuals without disabilities
Cure, recovery, optimal outcome	Describe goals of the individual

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Additional resource guides at: <https://www.delawareautismnetwork.org/>
 Research Recaps: Updates from the autism literature brought to you by the DNEA.