

Research Recap: Preferred Language Choices in the Autism Community

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The social model of disability views disability as one part of a person’s identity. From this viewpoint, disability is believed to result from a mismatch between the disabled person and their environment. It’s the environment that creates barriers, not the disability itself. Therefore, the way to address disability is to change the environment and society, rather than focusing on people with disabilities.

This perspective also shapes how we think about language. Using respectful language involves paying attention to context and being open to autistic individuals’ preferences. The table below outlines preferred and non-preferred language for describing autism and autistic people.

“ I am proud of my identity and of my community. I don’t “have” something that makes me who I am. I simply am.
- Amy Sequenzia* ”

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

Non-Preferred Language	Preferred Language
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 strength 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, health	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.