

History of the R-Word



Why "intellectual disability" is replacing "mental retardation"

The R-word, "retard," is slang for the term mental retardation. Mental retardation was what doctors, psychologists, and other professionals used to describe people with significant intellectual impairment. Today the r-word has become a common word used by society as an insult for someone or something stupid. For example, you might hear someone say, "That is so retarded" or "Don't be such a retard." When used in this way, the r-word can apply to anyone or anything, and is not specific to someone with a disability. But even when the r-word is not said to harm someone with a disability, it is hurtful. Because of this, Special Olympics and the greater disability community prefer to focus on people and their gifts and accomplishments, and to dispel negative attitudes and stereotypes. As language has evolved, Special Olympics and other organizations have updated their official terminology to use standard, people-first language that is more acceptable.

"When you say the "R" word it makes people feel bad and it hurts my feelings and I don't want to hear you guys say it. Instead, you can call me a leader, a hero, or a human being, but please don't call me the "R" word."

– Dony Knight, Special Olympics Oregon athlete

Rosa's Law

Rosa's Law was removed the terms "mental retardation" and "mentally retarded" from federal health, education and labor policy and replaces them with people first language "individual with an intellectual disability" and "intellectual disability."

92% of young Americans (ages 8-18) report having heard the R-word used, while 36% have heard the word used specifically toward someone with an intellectual disability.

The law was passed on October 8, 2010 and is named after Rosa Marcellino, a 9 year old girl with Down syndrome who worked vigorously with her parents and siblings to remove these words from the health and education code in her home state of Maryland after being bullied at school. The signing of Rosa's Law is a significant milestone in establishing dignity, inclusion and respect for all people with intellectual disabilities.

"Respect, value, and dignity – everyone deserves to be treated this way, including people with intellectual disabilities," said Dr. Timothy P. Shriver, Chairman and CEO of Special Olympics.

Classroom Conversation Starters:

1. Do you think the removal of this word will make a difference?
2. If you were someone with an intellectual disability, how would this change make you feel?
3. Do you believe that our attitudes are linked to the words we use?

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