

A to Z of Offensive Disablist Language



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Afflicted

ORIGIN: Suggests that higher force has cast the person down ('affligere' is Latin for to knock down, to weaken), or is causing them pain or suffering.

Use **'impairment'** or **disabled people** depending on the context.

Cripple

ORIGIN: This word comes from Old English crypel or creopel, both related to the verb 'to creep'. These, in turn, come from old (Middle) German 'kripple' meaning to be without power. The word is extremely offensive.

Use **person who has / person with....**

Dumb or Dumbo

ORIGIN: a) Not to be able to speak. b) These words have come to mean lacking intelligence but people can communicate in different ways not just talking.

Dwarf

ORIGIN: Dwarf is used to describe short people or short stature, through folklore and common usage it has negative connotations.

Feeble-minded

ORIGIN: The word feeble comes from old French meaning 'lacking strength'. It's meaning was formalised in the Mental Deficiency Act 1913, to mean not an extremely pronounced mental deficiency, but one still requiring care, supervision and control.

Use **person with learning difficulty**

Freak

ORIGIN: Associated with *freak show* where people who were very small, tall, large or with other visible differences or impairments were put on display for the public gaze in 17th, 18th and 19th century. It means strange or abnormal. This should not be used.

Handicapped

ORIGIN: Having an imposed disadvantage. The word may have several origins:

a) from horse races round the streets of Italian City States, such as Sienna, where really good riders had to ride one-handed, holding their hat in their other hand to make the race more equal.

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b) by association with penitent sinners (often disabled people) in many parts of Europe who were forced into begging to survive and had to go up to people 'cap in hand'.

Lame

ORIGIN: Coming from Old English *lama* Old German *lahm* and Old Norse *lami* meaning crippled, paralytic or weak. In Middle English came to mean 'crippled' in hands or feet. Lame duck is also used to mean any disabled person or thing or lame brain meaning learning difficulties.

In modern slang 'lame' is used for someone or something that is un-cool, boring, not exciting, not funny, weak, annoying, inadequate or a loser. In this respect 'lame' is used like 'gay' and should be challenged. It is offensive.

Idiot

ORIGIN: The word dates from the 13th century and comes from the Latin word *idiotia*, meaning 'ignorant person'. Again, it featured in the Mental Deficiency Act 1913 (see Feeble-minded), where it meant someone who was so mentally deficient that they should be detained for the whole of their lives.

Imbecile

ORIGIN: This word has been around since the 16th century and comes from the Latin, *imbecillus*, meaning 'feeble' (it literally meant 'without support' and was originally used mainly in a physical sense). It was similarly defined in the Mental Deficiency Act, as someone incapable of managing their own affairs.

Invalid

ORIGIN: Literally means not valid, from Latin 'invalidus'. In the 17th century it came to have a specific meaning, when referring to people, who were infirm, or disabled.

Mental or nutter or crazy

ORIGIN: All these are informal (slang) and offensive words for people with mental health issues. One in four people have a major bout of mental distress or become mental health system users. The vast majority are not dangerous.

1 in 10 of school age students are diagnosed with mental health issues at some point in their schooling. Such young people need understanding, support and counselling, not harassment and name calling. Other names used **Lunatic, Loony, Insane, Weird, Weirdo, Bonkers, Psycho and Mad**

Mentally handicapped

ORIGIN: Was and is still used to refer to people with Learning difficulties the origin of the word handicap is as above.

In the UK over 500,000 people with learning difficulties were locked away in Mental Handicap Hospitals because tests showed they had low Intelligence Quotients (IQ). These tests have since been shown to be culturally biased and only to measure one small part of

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how the brain works.

People with learning difficulties have chosen the name “people with learning difficulties” for themselves because they think that, through education, which they have largely been denied, they can improve their situation.

Mong/Mongolian

ORIGIN: Langdon Down was a doctor who worked at the London Hospital in Whitechapel in the 1860s. He noticed that around 1 in 800 babies was born with pronounced different features and capabilities. Their features reminded him of the Mongolian peoples. He postulated that there was a hierarchy of races (in descending order) - European, Asian, African and Mongols. Each was genetically inferior to the group above them. This was a racist theory. People with Down's Syndrome find it extremely offensive.

Moron(ic)

ORIGIN: Moron, Greek, meaning 'foolish, dull, sluggish'

Raspberry Ripple

ORIGIN: Cockney rhyming slang for 'cripple', and offensive.

Retard

ORIGIN: Still in common use in the USA for people with a learning difficulty; from the word retarded meaning held back in development – offensive.

Spazz, spazzie or spastic

ORIGIN: People with cerebral palsy are subject to muscle spasms or spasticity. These offensive words are sometimes used in reference to this. People with this impairment wish to be known as people with cerebral palsy or disabled people

Stupid

ORIGIN: 'Stupid' was used in America at the start 20th century 'scientifically' to denote 'one deficient in judgment and sense'.

The blind; The deaf; The disabled

ORIGIN: To call any group of people 'the' anything is to dehumanise them.

Use blind people, deaf people or disabled people.

Victim or sufferer

ORIGIN: Disabled people are not victims of their impairment because this implies they are consciously singled out for punishment by God or a higher being. Similarly, the word sufferer can imply someone upon whom something has been imposed as a punishment by a deity.

Wheelchair-bound

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ORIGIN: Wheelchair users see their wheelchair as a means of mobility and freedom, not something that restricts them, apart from problems with lack of access.

Notes for teachers:

All teaching staff should understand this guidance and be able to explain to children the history of disablist terms and appropriate language.

- Avoid using medical labels as this may promote a view of disabled people as patients. It also implies the medical label is the over-riding characteristic, which is inappropriate.
- If it is necessary to refer to a condition, it is better to say, for example, 'a person with epilepsy' not an epileptic, or 's/he has cerebral palsy' not a spastic.
- The word disabled should not be used as a collective noun (for example as in 'the disabled').
- Although disabled people have impairments, they are not people with disabilities. They are disabled by outside forces. They choose to be called "Disabled People" because of collective oppression and solidarity.