

What Does This Language Leave Room For?

A reflection for thinking beyond good intentions when talking about disability.

Language around disability is often chosen with good intentions. We may want to encourage a child, recognise their strengths or challenge assumptions about what is possible.

But the same words can feel very different depending on who chooses them, how they are used and what they leave room for.

Rather than asking only whether language sounds positive, we can ask what it allows the person with a disability to say about their own experience.

POSITIVE WORDS, DIFFERENT MESSAGES

LANGUAGE	CONSIDER...
"Your disability is your superpower."	Can they also say disability is difficult sometimes?
"You're so inspiring."	What exactly are we finding inspiring?
"Don't let disability define you."	Are we expanding their identity or asking them to distance themselves from disability?
"Everyone has limitations."	Are we connecting—or minimising meaningful differences?
"There are no limits."	Is there room to recognise genuine capacity and ask for help?
"Differently abled."	Is this the person's preferred language, or are we uncomfortable saying disability?

BOTTOM REFLECTION

Does this language create more room for the person's experience—or less?

Positive intentions matter. So does the impact of the words we choose.



The Language Check



*Positive language
should still leave
room for the
person's truth.*

Before using language about someone's disability, ask:

WHO CHOSE IT?

- Does the person use this language about themselves?
- Have we asked what terminology they prefer?
- Are adults deciding how a child's disability should be described without involving them?

WHAT DOES IT COMMUNICATE?

- Does it recognise the person as a whole person?
- Does it acknowledge disability without treating it as something negative?
- Does it create pressure to be positive, strong or inspirational?
- Could it unintentionally minimise barriers or support needs?

WHAT DOES IT LEAVE ROOM FOR?

Can the person still say:

- I need help.
- This is difficult.
- I can't do this.
- I'm proud of this.
- I'm frustrated.
- My disability matters to me.
- I don't want to talk about this.

BOTTOM REFLECTION

If the person disagreed with the positive story we were telling about them, would there still be room for their version?

Empowering language should not require someone to perform empowerment.



Who Owns the Story?



Positive language should still leave room for the person's truth.

Respectful language doesn't tell someone what disability should mean to them. It gives them room to tell us.

Sometimes the issue isn't the word being used. It is who has been given the power to define, interpret or share someone else's experience.



Before describing someone's experience

Ask:

- Am I describing something I actually know?
- Am I making assumptions about how disability feels to them?
- Have they described themselves this way?
- Am I turning an ordinary experience into a disability story?



Before sharing someone's story

Ask:

- Is this my story to tell?
- Has the person agreed to this information being shared?
- Do they understand where and how it will be shared?
- Am I including personal information because it is necessary—or because it makes the story more powerful?
- Would I share this level of detail about someone without a disability?



When celebrating achievement

Ask:

- What exactly are we celebrating?
- Would we describe this as extraordinary if disability were not present?
- Can we recognise the achievement without revealing private struggles behind it?
- Has the person been given control over how their achievement is presented?

ONE FINAL PROMPT

Instead of asking, “How can I make this sound positive?”
Ask, “How can I make sure this person still has ownership of what their experience means?”

*Respectful language doesn't tell someone what disability should mean to them.
It gives them room to tell us.*

