

PEOPLE-FIRST LANGUAGE GUIDE

A RESOURCE FOR 2GEN PRACTITIONERS

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Inclusive language¹ conveys respect to all people, promotes belonging, and seeks to disrupt the social norms that perpetuate injustice. Inclusive language avoids bias, steers clear of words and sayings that give offense or cause harm, and affirms multiple aspects of human identity.

When organizations adopt inclusive language practices, it makes a difference both inside and out. Internally, it helps create a space where people can bring their full selves to the work of the organization, unlocking the potential of diverse teams. Externally, the practice of inclusive language models and demonstrates a commitment to fairness, inclusion, and accessibility.

[FrameWorks Institute](#) designed this brief guide with support from [Ascend at the Aspen Institute](#) to help two-generation (2Gen) practitioners with inclusive language practices in English. This analysis is grounded in research and contemporary practice in the US. We welcome partners in other cultural, national, or linguistic contexts to adapt it as necessary.

Key Inclusive Language Practices

Inclusive language is not simply a glossary of euphemisms or a list of things not to say. Inclusive language is a conscious practice, a process of becoming ever more mindful of how language and symbolism affects individual experiences, group dynamics, and power relationships.

This resource begins with a selected set of practices that lead to more respectful, more intentional language. This list is far from exhaustive. It has been curated to focus on cross-cutting principles that can inform work with the many types of families and communities involved in two-generation approaches to building family well-being.

¹Multiple voices have offered powerful [critiques of the term “inclusion.”](#) noting that it suggests a power dynamic in which the more powerful are “including” the less powerful. [john a. powell suggests the term “belonging”](#) as a more apt alternative. FrameWorks acknowledges and embraces these points of view. We have decided to stick to the term “inclusive language” for now to make it easier for our audiences to recognize and understand what this resource offers. We encourage other organizations to adopt terms like “respectful language” or “liberatory language,” or to create other terms that capture the intention to use language that resists othering and promotes belonging.

Three key inclusive language practices

1. **Expect, embrace, and encourage language change.**

Because language is constantly evolving, inclusive language practices are also dynamic. Words that convey respect to people change with time. This is especially true for words that refer to groups with less power or privilege, as social forces tend to quickly assign these words negative connotations, and affected groups seek to resist those labels. Inclusive language practitioners recognize this dynamic, tune into conversations about the limits or problems with words, and move in solidarity with community leaders pushing for linguistic change.

Some ways of implementing this practice include adopting and adhering to a style guide that reflects current best practices, following conversations about changing community usage, discussing evolving connotations regularly within your organization, and updating your style guide no less frequently than every other year.

2. **Default to people-first, people-centered language.**

People-first language means putting “people” first in a literal sense—using the word “people” or “person” before adjectives that describe them (as in *people with disabilities* rather than *disabled people*). Person-centered language is the practice of centering people’s humanity by describing and depicting them in ways that offer a holistic view of their individuality and subjective experiences. For instance, the term “client” reduces a person to their role in a program, while alternatives like “families who engage with us” centers their everyday, lived identity.

These companion practices help signal and reinforce the belief that, first and foremost, people’s dignity and integrity transcend any condition, diagnosis, social challenge, or other descriptor.

Inclusive language practitioners also recognize that some individuals, activist groups, and communities prefer identity-first language and

strive to convey respect by asking about and deferring to such preferences.

Person-First Language	Label-First Language
<i>the families who engage with us</i>	<i>clients</i>
<i>people who participate in our programs</i>	<i>program beneficiaries</i>
<i>people with incomes below the poverty level</i>	<i>the poor/poor people</i>
<i>students who receive federal financial aid</i>	<i>low-income students</i>
<i>parents who receive income assistance</i>	<i>welfare recipients</i>
<i>youth in foster care</i>	<i>foster youth</i>
<i>person caught up in the justice system</i>	<i>offender/incarcerated person/parolee</i>
<i>person experiencing homelessness</i>	<i>homeless person</i>
<i>child with a disability</i>	<i>disabled child</i>

People-Centered Description	Label-Centered Description
<i>Tiffany considers her two children, Justice (3 yo) and Joy (11 mos), her “reason to be.” Since giving birth to Joy, Tiffany has parented from home. She reports enjoying spending time with her infant and toddler but also describes it as “lonely at times.”</i>	<i>African American, female, head-of-household, difficulty maintaining employment. Two children, aged 11 mos and 3. Neither child is in child care. Evidence of attachment but social isolation seems to be an issue.</i>

3. Use asset-based language to destabilize deficit-based views of people experiencing a form of inequality or injustice.

Asset-based language (sometimes called strength-based language) focuses on people's strengths and skills rather than their perceived deficits. Asset-based language highlights the resistance, resilience, and resourcefulness of individuals and groups who have been systematically marginalized. This practice isn't about superficial shifts to euphemisms or indulging in disingenuous positivity. Rather, it's about shifting perspective so that instead of seeing only things to fix, we focus on places and resources that allow us to build. At other times, this practice involves adopting precise terms as opposed to well-worn labels that have taken on negative connotations.

A related practice, attribution of responsibility, carefully frames descriptions of undesirable conditions, like poverty. In this practice, instead of linking a problem or deficit to people experiencing it (as in *people in poverty*), we link it instead to the systemic nature or structural source of the problem (as in *people facing economic injustice*).

Possible Precise Terms	Terms to Avoid
<i>families facing economic injustice/ inequality /insecurity</i>	<i>poor families; families living in poverty; at-risk families</i>
<i>families in lower income brackets</i>	<i>low-income families</i>
<i>families facing a rising cost of living without an increase in wages</i>	<i>families struggling to make ends meet</i>
<i>communities fighting for inclusion and investment</i>	<i>disadvantaged underserved communities</i>
<i>families experiencing homelessness</i>	<i>homeless families</i>
<i>person facing barriers to effective parenting</i>	<i>unfit parent</i>
<i>fathers/fathers who parent across households</i>	<i>non-custodial father</i>
<i>groups that have been historically excluded</i>	<i>underrepresented minorities</i>
<i>groups that are systematically marginalized</i>	<i>marginalized groups</i>
<i>first-generation college students</i>	<i>student from uneducated families</i>
<i>children learning two languages; English language learner</i>	<i>limited English proficiency</i>
<i>survivors of trauma/ assault/ violence; people who have experienced abuse/trauma</i>	<i>trauma survivors, domestic abuse victims, abused women</i>

To Learn More

To dig deeper into inclusive language, check out FrameWorks' [Words About People Style Guide](#), a living document that we update regularly. It provides more detailed information on respectful ways to refer to specific social groups, offers guidance on language that may offend or cause harm, and recommends resources created by leaders of communities fighting for respectful representation.

You may also find it useful to read or revisit [Framing Two-Generation Approaches to Supporting Families](#).

We encourage you to adopt or adapt the language in this guide — and [we welcome your feedback](#) on our recommendations and choices.

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Please follow standard APA rules for citation, with the FrameWorks Institute as publisher:
Julie Sweetland. (2022). *People-First Language Guide: A Resource for 2Gen Practitioners*. FrameWorks Institute: Washington, DC.



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Learn more at ascend.aspeninstitute.org.



The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

Learn more at frameworksinstitute.org.