

TALKING ABOUT AGEISM

Guide to Inclusive Communication

Ageism is a system of beliefs, attitudes, and actions that affects all people at all ages, but is considered most detrimental for the physical health of our oldest citizens. Ageists view a person's age number or chronological age as a marker of essential characteristics or type, leading to stereotyping and suppressing the experience and true nature of individuals.

General Principles for Reducing Bias about Age

- Most times there is no need to refer to a person's age. When the need arises, list the specific age number, rather than assigning a category that may be vague and create negative connotations.
- Age ranges or generational cohort should be specific, or defined by birth date. For example, "baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964".
- Whenever possible, ask the preferred terminology. One person may prefer "senior," while another person with the same age number may prefer "older adult."
- Avoid using age-related terminology to describe a situation metaphorically, especially if the phrasing is meant as an insult, or is used flippantly.
- Do not use language that patronizes, sentimentalizes, distorts, or ignores people based on their age number.
- Avoid negative, value-laden terms that overextend the limitations of a young person's developmental stage or the severity of an older person's health.
- To ensure people of all ages have a voice in society it is vital to reject a purely "age-number" framing of life stage, to always use medical terminology accurately, and to use narratives that support people of all ages.

Specific Words to Avoid and Words to Use When Communicating About Age	
Avoid	Use
Seniors, elderly, ancient, geezer, old lady/old man, fossil, cougar, the aged	Older adult, older person, older Americans
Childish, immature	Teen, teenager or preteen. Adolescent (if describing the developmental stage of adolescence)
Generational labels, unless defined by years of birth	People over... People younger...
Emerging adult	Student (if context-appropriate), young person, youth
Geriatric (unless in the phrase geriatric medicine), infirm	People over...

Five General Principles for Reducing Bias

- 1. When writing, speaking, or using images, aim to use examples that reflect a broad range of identities and perspectives.** Whenever possible, ask the preferred terminology. One person with a visual disability may prefer “blind,” while another person with a similar disability may prefer “person with low or limited loss of vision.”
- 2. Differences of any kind should only be mentioned when relevant.** Marital status, age, sexual orientation, racial and ethnic identity or the fact that a person has a disability should not be mentioned gratuitously.
- 3. Use the appropriate level of specificity.**
 - **Not specific:** Using the word “man” to represent humanity
 - **Specific:** More accurate would be using the phrase “men and women”
 - **Not specific:** At risk children
 - **Specific:** Children at risk for early school “dropout”
- 4. Be sensitive to labels.**
 - Avoid labeling people whenever possible.
 - If you must use a label, remember to call people what they prefer to be called, keeping in mind that these preferences can change over time. For example, rather than American Indian or Native American, many groups prefer to be referred to by their tribal name, “..., members of the Cherokee tribe.”
- 5. Put the person first.** For example, people with diabetes” or “Mary, who uses a screen reader.”

Common Language and Glossary Terms

Accessibility How easily a person with disabilities can negotiate a physical or virtual environment, for example, part of a building, a structure, or a website. Accessibility also refers to the design of structures, products, devices, services, or environments for people who experience disabilities.

Adulthood A system of beliefs, attitudes, and actions that devalue and dehumanize young people, denigrates youth experiences, and dismisses their ideas.

Discrimination Occurs when a person, or a group of people, is treated less favorably than another person or group because of their background or certain perceived personal characteristics.

Diversity Diversity of thought, or cognitive diversity, is more than age, religion, gender, race, physical ability. It’s about how different point of views are accepted and valued.

Inclusion Seeking out, identifying, understanding, and removing barriers to full participation and belonging; intentionally including additional difference in a group or process; and encouraging high levels of both individuality and belonging.

Microaggression A comment or action that is subtly and often unintentionally hostile or demeaning to a member of a minority or marginalized group.

Unconscious Bias Social stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form outside their own conscious awareness.

Resources for Inclusive Language

This guide and guides on other topics of inclusive communication can be found at marketing-partners.com/guide-to-inclusive-language.