



The Arc of Texas

Position Statement on Acceptable Terminology *Should the term "mental retardation" be used?*

Background

According to the American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR), "Mental Retardation" is a disability that occurs before age 18. It is characterized by significant limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social and practical adaptive skills. It is diagnosed through the use of standardized tests of intelligence and adaptive behavior. AAMR points out that both functioning and adaptive behavior are affected positively by individualized supports. (AAMR, 2002)

Today, the term "mental retardation" is identifiable and easily understood by members of the general public, the media, potential funders, administrators, the medical community (doctors), public schools, and policy makers. These individuals may not know that the term "mental retardation" is offensive and considered to be outdated by self-advocates and their loved ones. It is also important to note that the term "mental retardation" offers special protections in key areas of federal and state policy (i.e. death penalty cases, SSI, Medicaid). The fact is that the term "mental retardation" is an eligibility requirement for supports and services.

The term "mental retardation" is also offensive to many people. It is stigmatizing and inappropriate. Some individuals feel that the term "mental retardation," similar to the term "retarded" or "retardation," minimizes the existence of certain individuals by classifying them into a separate and inferior class. It is a term that is outdated and infuriating to members of the disability community.

In an effort to respond to the voices of its constituency, The Arc of the United States removed the term "mental retardation" from its mission statement in 2002 and replaced it with the phrase "people with cognitive, intellectual, and developmental disabilities." The Arc of the U.S. communicated to its membership that the change in terminology does not change its commitment to the people they have traditionally served.

Today, The Arc of the U.S. does not encourage states, officials, families, or individuals to use or promote the term "mental retardation," although the organization continues to use the term "mental retardation" when no other suitable substitute is appropriate. It is also important to note that The Arc of the U.S. will not pursue terminology changes in federal statute, citing that special protections in federal statute are essential.

Position

After careful thought and consideration by our volunteer leadership, it is the position of The Arc of Texas to continue to use the term "mental retardation" whenever necessary until another equivalent term or phrase is identified and defined, and used in state and federal law.

Rationale

The volunteer leadership of The Arc of Texas recognizes and understands that the term "mental retardation" is offensive, stigmatizing, and inappropriate. Even more appalling, is the use of the term "mental retardation," not for diagnosis, but for prognosis of a certain individual. At the same time, The Arc of Texas

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recognizes and understands that the term "mental retardation" offers special protections in state and federal policy and has a clear and recognized meaning in the professional community.

For many years, advocates at the local, state, and federal levels have struggled to find a new, yet equivalent, term to replace the term "mental retardation." Time and time again, efforts have proven ineffective. Today, organizations such as The Arc of the U.S. use terms such as "intellectual disability," "cognitive impairment," and "developmental disability" to refer to individuals that have a condition known as "mental retardation." The concern of The Arc of Texas is that the various terms being used to refer to "mental retardation" are not adequate. The terms, as listed previously have different meanings. Some terms are broad and encompass multiple conditions, and others such as in the case of the term "intellectual disability," have no meaning since the term is not officially defined by a medical or psychological association.

It is the goal of The Arc of Texas to respond to the wishes of its constituency. However, the volunteer leadership of this organization feels it is critical that The Arc of Texas respond to our constituency in a responsible and rational manner. To this end, it is the position of The Arc of Texas to continue to use the term "mental retardation" whenever necessary until another equivalent term or phrase is identified and defined. Furthermore, The Arc of Texas strongly encourages The Arc of the U.S. to: (1) communicate our concerns to the appropriate entities, such as medical and psychological associations, with out delay; and (2) lead a campaign to identify, develop, and define a new term to replace the outdated term "mental retardation," so that this conflict is resolved promptly, responsibly, and once and for all.

References:

American Association on Mental Retardation (www.aamr.org)

How to Refer to The Arc, its Chapters, and Constituents, The Arc of the United States (www.thearc.org)

Introduction to Mental Retardation, (October 2004, Revision), The Arc of the United States (www.thearc.org)

The Arc's Logo and Name Changes Throughout Its History, The Arc of the United States (www.thearc.org)

Usage of the Term 'Mental Retardation: ' Language, Image and Public Education, (June 14, 2002), The University of Kansas (<http://www.ssa.gov/disability/MentalRetardationReport.pdf>)

Position Statement on Acceptable Terminology, adopted by The Arc of Texas Board, is effective January 2006.