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Language is Powerful

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Editor's note: Carol Mills is an assistant professor of Communication Studies at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and the mother of three. She will present at the Parent Group Leadership Seminar at the NDSC Convention on effectively crafting messages for different audiences. Mills' three-year-old daughter, Maren Flannery, has Trisomy 21.

The NDSC joined Mills in advocating for ESPN to stop using the offensive song.

This summer, ESPN promoted the NBA playoffs with upbeat and funky promos featuring the song "Let's Get It Started" sung by the hip hop group, The Black Eyed Peas. The song was actually an adaptation of their earlier release, "Let's Get Retarded." When I discovered this, I contacted ESPN and encouraged others to do so, too.

Do you think ESPN would have used the BEPs song if it was originally "Let's Act Like _____" (insert racial, religious, cultural, or sexist) epithet or your choice? Absolutely not. Though hip hop may play by different cultural and language rules, the Disney subsidiary ESPN does not. Adapting a blatantly offensive song clearly violates appropriate cultural and business standards. During the same time period, teen actor Lindsay Lohan repeatedly replied "that's retarded," when questioned about various rumors. And, Jon Stewart, of The Daily Show, regularly used the phrase "like a bunch of retards." There was little attention or reprimand for any of them.

However, during the NBA finals weeks, there was intense media scrutiny and criticism for football coach Bill Parcells using the phrase "Jap play" during a press conference and basketball legend Larry Bird's comments about race affecting the NBA. And, comedian Jimmy Kimmel's show was taken off the air one night because he made an insensitive comment about people from Detroit.

These events reflect a larger social issue: Though clearly sensitive to slurs against other groups, the general population does not see the derogatory use of "retarded" as offensive. Using the word as a pejorative term is common in entertainment venues, daily conversation and children's play. Though a child would be reprimanded for making a racist comment in most schools, it is not uncommon for students — even teachers — to use the word as an epithet for something they consider negative or inappropriate.

The implications for taking control of language are profound. If children grow up hearing that when they forget something they are "retarded" or that those who act poorly are "a bunch of retards," how do you think they will react when meeting someone with a

diagnosis of mental retardation? Do you think neighborhood parents will fight inclusion if they hear about “retarded children” more than if they hear about “children with developmental delays?”

Our society’s long-time use of “retarded” as an epithet is decidedly negative. We can work to end this. Speak up and educate people.

The best approach often is a direct one. You might say, “You know, ‘retarded’ actually means ‘to do slowly.’ The way you’ve just used it hurts me and many others. It’s like hearing a racial slur.” I’ve often done this, especially with college students, and they are surprised. Most have no idea they are being offensive. They think it’s just another word until told otherwise.

If being direct is too scary, try a gentle question such as, “What did you mean by saying it is ‘retarded’?” This can create an opportunity to share the term’s negative use. Or, if it’s comfortable, try humor. When someone says, “I’m so retarded...” you might say with a smile and a wink, “Oh, that’s okay, so is my son and I love him anyway.” After breaking the ice, explain why it’s important.

This is not about confrontation — it is about education. After awhile, you’ll find a comfortable approach. Yes, initially, it may feel awkward, especially when talking to a doctor, teacher or media representative. But remember, those people *need* to hear it most. The more you speak up, the more natural it becomes.

Similarly, you educate others about using “people first” language. If someone refers to your child as a “Down’s child,” simply say, “Actually, he is a child who has Down syndrome.” If the person says, “It’s the same thing,” or gives you “The Look,” you might ask if they’d like to be called by their last name first from now on. The words are the same, only the order is different, why should they care? Or, as many people do, ask if they’d want to be called the “ulcer woman,” or the “cancer dad.” Diagnoses should never define the person.

Finding our voice to educate others and correct language might be difficult, but it is imperative. This is not simply about semantics, political correctness or being overly sensitive. It is about respect. Once you start educating others, you will be surprised by reactions. A few may never get it, but most people will thank you. They will even tell you that they never realized the impact of their words. In that moment, you might say, “That’s why I said something. I knew you’d understand.” Then, breathe a sigh of relief and think of what and how you might respond the next time there’s a need to educate someone. And, we all know, there will be a next time.