



### Overarching Principles

Language is fluid and contextual among different cultures.

Communities often develop their own vernacular that can be unfamiliar to others. Even within a community, terms may have cultural, generational and geographical specificities.

Think about the intention for using a word or phrase, whether it has any origins, and whether there is a more inclusive way to state or convey a thought.

Understand cultural differences, recognize potential biases, and look beyond differences to work productively with children, families, and communities whose cultural contexts are different from one's own.

Seek to learn about and understand someone's culture and respect cultural differences that may be present.

Acknowledging and affirming differences from the outset shifts to the premise of honoring and inviting multiple perspectives, and celebrating rather than suppressing diversity.

Acknowledge any language mistakes you make and how it may make the person feel.

## Inclusive and Affirming Language

**All individuals have identities that make us unique. Utilizing inclusive and affirming language demonstrates an ongoing commitment to communicating in ways that are most respectful and effective for engaging with children and families.**

- Inclusive language is language that is respectful and promotes the acceptance of people of all cultures, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, immigration status, abilities, sexual orientations, gender identities or expressions, and faiths or religions in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, tribes, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each.
- Inclusive language is free from words, phrases or tones that demean, insult, exclude, or stereotype people on the basis of their membership of a certain group or because of a particular attribute.
- Affirming language is language that demonstrates and supports the value of an individual's identity.

### Principles of Inclusive Language

- **Respect.** Create space for people to express themselves as they are and to the extent that they wish to. DCS staff can create space and model inclusivity by introducing themselves by their stated name and pronouns.
- **Ask.** When interacting with people for the first time, describe the intention to use respectful language and ask, "What name do you like to go by?"
- **Gender-inclusive language.** Use terms and phrases that are not gender specific and avoid bias towards a particular sex or social gender. For example, replace gendered words such as "husband" or "wife" with the word "spouse" or "partner."
- **Avoid stereotypes.** Take a moment to bring awareness to where your thoughts are taking you and how you might be categorizing a person. Confront your thoughts and perceptions of the person. Be cautious about making statements or assumptions based on race, ethnicity, national origin, tribal affiliation, class or social conditions, ability, faith or religion, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, and other cultural factors.
- **Avoid labels.** When labels are used, it is as if the word wholly and forever defines a person; it can also trigger biases in others. For example, instead of "addict" use "a person with a substance use disorder".
- **Recognize diverse family formations.** Not every family has a mother and father. Use language that is inclusive of all family formations such as "parent or caregiver".

**The best approach to engage with families is to express the desire to use language that is polite and respectful and simply ask the family for guidance.**

- Demonstrate a compassionate, non-judgmental, and respectful attitude.
- Listen and be responsive to earn the trust of individuals being served.
- Be aware of what the individual's cultural identity is.
- Be accepting of what the individual's cultural identity means to them.
- Be willing to avoid bias and maintain an openness to learning about the individual's experiences.
- Affirm and uphold that individuals have rights that fit their identity.

## Important Terms

**Culture** is the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group.

Culture includes ways in which people with disabilities or people from various religious backgrounds or people who identify as LGBTQ+ experience the world around them.

Culture includes, but is not limited to, history, traditions, values, family systems, and artistic expressions.

**Race** refers to physical differences that groups and cultures consider socially significant. Race is a social construct that is not universal, so one must be careful not to impose racial labels on ethnic groups.

**Ethnicity** refers to shared cultural characteristics such as language, ancestry, practices, and beliefs.

**Sexual orientation** is the manner in which an individual is emotionally, spiritually, physically, or romantically attracted, regardless of gender, to men, women, both, or neither (asexual).

**Gender identity** is person's internal identification as male, female, or non-binary. Gender identity may or may not correspond to the sex or gender marker that is listed on the person's birth certificate.

**Gender expression** is the manner in which a person shows gender identity to others; a combination of behavior, hairstyles, voice, body characteristics, or other gender-related behaviors.

**Immigration status** refers to the way in which a person is present in the United States.

### When it is relevant to discuss race, ethnicity, or national origin, use the language preferred by the individual.

- Preferred terminology depends on the preferences of the individual or group, and may change over time and on the basis of location.
- It is important to respect a group's or an individual's preference about how they wish to be addressed and referred to.
- Be cautious about racial, cultural and other identity references that are not necessary, or assume similarities and affinity.

### Use inclusive language about immigration status to affirm and acknowledge the legitimacy of everyone as human beings.

- Rather than referring to residents who do not have legal documentation with dehumanizing terms as alien or illegal alien or simply illegal, the word undocumented is advised. Do not make assumptions about a person's country of origin.

### When speaking to or about a person with a disability, focus on the person and not on their disability.

- Disabilities and most medical conditions are something a person has rather than what they are.
- Be cautious about using language that may be perceived as offensive or suggests weakness or infirmity. For example, the word "handicap" may be perceived as offensive to some individuals.
- Do not try to diagnose or define a person.

### Language is important when speaking about sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression because it facilitates respect by allowing people to use language that describes their identity.

- Sexual orientation and gender identity are two distinctly different concepts that are particular to each individual and vary across a spectrum.
- Do not make assumption of a person's sexual orientation and gender identity based on their expression or presentation.
- Remember that some individuals may not want to share their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Use an individual's name and pronouns consistently. If unsure about what name or pronoun someone uses, politely ask. When someone is referred to by a name or pronoun that is not aligned with the person's stated name and pronouns, acknowledge the lapse and extend an apology.

### Acknowledge that people have different beliefs and some individuals may have little or no religious affiliation.

- Do not make assumptions about how another individual may or may not practice religion.

### For more information on inclusive and affirming language:

*American Psychological Foundation Bias-Free Language*

*Linguistic Society of America Guidelines for Inclusive Language*

*National Association of Social Workers Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice*

*Northwest Inclusive Language Guide*

*Oregon Health and Science University Inclusive Language Guide*