



THE GOLDEN SLATE

The official newsletter of the California
Agricultural Teachers' Association

Demystifying Disability: A Look at Disabilities Language and How to Maneuver Within the FFA Space

By Carlos Lopez, National FFA Organization

April is Autism Awareness Month. This opens us to a greater conversation about students with disabilities and how we can assist in providing an avenue of success for those FFA members.

It's important to recognize that people with disabilities constitute a significant portion of the national population, yet there remains a lack of understanding and awareness about how to support and be allies to the disability community. Within organizations like FFA, where members of the disability community are actively participating and thriving, there is an opportunity to further address and remove barriers to their full inclusion.

Acknowledging the diversity within the disability community and understanding that each individual's experiences and needs may vary is a crucial first step. By actively listening to the voices of our members with disabilities, their caretakers, and advisors; and incorporating their perspectives into program development and decision-making processes, we can better identify and address existing barriers.

Creating an inclusive environment involves not only removing physical barriers but also addressing attitudinal and systemic barriers that may hinder participation and inclusion. Identifying barriers and developing ways to eliminate them can help both disabled and nondisabled individuals better understand how to support and advocate for inclusivity within our programs.

Fostering a culture of respect, empathy, and openness can encourage dialogue and collaboration between all members of the organization. By recognizing the value

CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURAL TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

CALAGTEACHERS.ORG



and contributions of people with disabilities and actively striving to remove barriers to their participation, we can create a more inclusive and supportive environment where all FFA members can thrive.

Choosing the right language for discussing disabilities is indeed important, and it's understandable that certain terms like "special needs" may still be prevalent in various contexts. However, it's essential to be mindful of how language can impact perceptions and attitudes towards individuals with disabilities.

While it may not always be feasible to completely avoid terms like "special needs," it's beneficial to strive for more inclusive language whenever possible. Using person-first language, such as "member with disabilities" or simply "member," can help shift the focus away from the disability itself and emphasize the person's identity first and foremost.

Additionally, recognizing that preferences for language may vary among individuals with disabilities is crucial. Some may prefer terms like "disabled" or "person with disabilities," while others may have different preferences. When in doubt, it's always respectful to ask individuals about their preferred language and terminology.

By being conscious of our language choices and respecting individual preferences, we can contribute to creating a more inclusive and respectful environment for FFA members with disabilities.

Links for Additional Information:

- [Book - Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to Be an Ally](#)[Autism Awareness](#)
- [National Education Association differences between 504 plan and IEP](#)
- [Official ADA government site](#)
- [FFA New Horizons Article "Ag is for All Abilities"](#)
- [Teaching HS students about disability inclusion](#)

Carlos Lopez boasts an extensive career in California's agricultural education landscape, with nine years of experience in Parlier, followed by two years in Palmdale, and a dedicated tenure of 15 years at Reedley High School. Presently, Carlos brings his wealth of knowledge and expertise to the National FFA Organization, serving as an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Specialist.

