

Rated I for Insensitive

The term “mental retardation” has been used in many different contexts for decades. Phrases such as, “That’s retarded,” or “She’s such a retard” are being heard in schools, homes, movies, sports arenas, media outlets, and many other places with increasing frequency. Not only are these phrases being used by children, but they are also repeatedly used by adults; the very people who are supposed to be setting an example by teaching the impact and power of language, not abusing it.

As a result, what began as a clinical diagnosis for individuals with intellectual and behavioral limitations has developed into an offensive, inappropriate, and overly used form of slang that can be devastating to many, especially when used as mockery. Using the word “retarded” in a comical context is discriminatory against a population that, for the most part, cannot fight for their own rights. Organizations such as The Arc of the Capital Area, Disability Assistance, and Easter Seals also struggle daily to overcome this hurtful word and to educate the community about citizens with disabilities.

Advocacy and provider services now struggle with the use of a word that has become pejorative and stigmatizing, but at the same time, is a legal and medical definition for a life-long condition.

Why is it that we expect sensitivity and censorship to be shown to people’s race, sexual orientation, and/or religion, but do not bestow the same sensitivity upon people with disabilities and their families? People, who are African American, Hispanic, and gay/lesbian, are able to fight any discrimination they encounter, and do so with public support. The developmentally disabled, as they preferred to be called today, are generally not able to take advantage of this opportunity to fight back for their own rights.

Finding the line between what is funny and what is hurtful is not difficult. While those people cracking the jokes may not be thinking of the word “retarded” in a clinical sense, they are shamelessly attacking a group who spend their entire lifetime struggling to rise above society’s stereotype in order to simply feel included.

“Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind”- Rudyard Kipling.

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