



## Strength-Based vs. Deficit-Based Language

Communication – verbal, non-verbal, direct, indirect and written – is key to establishing a respectful relationship with any person, family, community, Tribal Nation, Village or group. Using respectful, appropriate language honors the spirit of those we are speaking to or about. Among the Lakota people, for example, there is a belief that individuals, families, communities and even words and thoughts have a spirit that needs to be handled with care. Outlined below are some language references that include deficit-based and strength-based examples to help with honoring relationships. When in doubt, It is important to ask the individual their preferred terms.

REFERENCE	Strength-Based	Deficit-Based
Multiple Needs – substance use, mental health, poverty	Individual or Family with complex needs	Dysfunctional Individual or Family
Disability/Loss of Hearing	Individual/People with hearing loss	Hearing impaired
Disability/Sight	Some prefer “blind person,” others prefer “person with blindness”	Sight impaired
Gender Identity	Ask how they would like to be referred to – e.g., she/her, he/him, they/them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purposefully misgendering someone</li> <li>• “You are a boy, why are you dressing like a girl”</li> <li>• “You were born a female; you can’t be anything else”</li> </ul>
Youth/Family being served by Child Welfare System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relative being served by the Child Welfare System</li> <li>• Person experiencing barriers to successful parenting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foster child, client, throwaway kid</li> <li>• Unfit Parent</li> </ul>
Youth being served by Juvenile Justice System	Relative or youth involved in Juvenile Justice System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Juvenile Delinquent, JDC kid</li> </ul>
Youth being served by Behavioral Health system	Relative with behavioral health needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ADHD Kid</li> <li>• The Manic-Depressive</li> <li>• The Schizo</li> <li>• Crazy</li> <li>• Insane</li> </ul>
Youth being served by the Education System for additional educational needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relative with special education needs</li> <li>• Focus on the system that is serving the youth as needing to change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The special ed kid</li> <li>• “If only they would just apply themselves”</li> </ul>
Youth who do not have a place to call home	Youth who are houseless	The homeless kid



REFERENCE	Strength-Based	Deficit-Based
Substance Use	Person with Substance Use Disorder	Addict
Suicidality	Died by suicide	Committed Suicide – stigmatizes mental health needs
Multiple contacts with systems	Uses supports and services as needed	Frequent Flier
Not making progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unaware of opportunities and/or own strengths</li> <li>• Not ready yet, not open yet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helpless, Hopeless</li> <li>• Resistant</li> </ul>
Assessment/evaluation Reference	What happened to her/him/them?	What is wrong with her/him/them?
Geographical location	Lives in the beautiful territorial homelands of the (LOCATION).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lives in high crime area</li> <li>• Impoverished community</li> <li>• Low-achieving area</li> <li>• Poverty-stricken</li> </ul>

**Language that Promotes and/or Perpetuates Oppression and Violence**

- Field worker – reference to slavery
- Target group – military reference, someone to annihilate
- Mission – military reference; similar reference as “target”
- Trigger – set someone off, language of violence
- Bite the bullet
- Outgunned
- Battle ground

**Language with specific derogatory reference to Indigenous/Native People**

1. Bury the hatchet – used as a reference to resolve conflict
2. Go off the reservation – a term used to refer to those who do not conform
3. Low man on the totem pole – reference to hierarchy
4. Savage – implies no boundaries
5. On the Warpath – reference to wanting to fight, engage in conflict
6. Geronimo – the name of an Apache leader who defended his land, people and way of life, is now used inappropriately as a “battle cry” for sports teams and other groups as a way to inspire others; also used inappropriately for the code name for Osama Bin Laden, who was labeled as an enemy terrorist.
7. Circle the wagons – a reference to protecting the people from the wild, savage Indians; now used as a phrase to denote banding together for a common cause



8. Hold down the fort – another reference to protecting the property from savage Indians
9. Let's have a powwow (referring to a meeting) – although not as offensive as previous terms, the origin of powwow is from a specific Tribal language whose meaning became misappropriated to refer to gatherings of Indigenous people. The word is now used to refer to Indigenous/Tribal gatherings where dance, song and celebrations take place.
10. Calling Native/Indigenous males "Chief"
11. Mocking beautiful Native/Indigenous surnames like Two Bulls, Feather Earring, Two Hawk - and/or asking, "Is that really your name"?
12. "Get off the rez and make something of yourself" which can be reflective of shame, and individualism.
13. "That is so rezzy", implying that if one lives on a reservation it is something to be ashamed of and can send a message of "othering."

## References

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