

RESPECTFUL LANGUAGE



Following are guidelines for using respectful and appropriate language with older persons.

Older persons should be described using adjectives, and phrases like “older adult” and “older individuals” are preferred. Choose neutral terms such as “older adults,” “older populations,” and “people over age X” to describe groups of people.

Avoid terms such as “the aged,” “senior,” “senior citizen,” “geriatric” or “boomer” and only use the term “elder” for Indigenous peoples for whom this term may be preferred and culturally appropriate.

Use person-first language, such as “person living with dementia” or “person with a diagnosis of dementia” rather than “dementia sufferer”.

Use “we” and “us” instead of “they” and “them” when appropriate. We are all ageing, and many issues that affect older adults also affect younger populations.

Speak to the person as a fellow adult and ask how they wish to be addressed. Some older people may prefer a more formal term of address such as “Mr” or “Mrs”, and others may find overly familiar terms such as “dear” disrespectful.

Avoid “elderspeak” such as using a “singsong” voice, substituting “we” for “you” (as in “how are we doing today?”) or speaking overly slow or simply.

Speak slowly, clearly and patiently. Speak at the individual person’s pace, ensuring you have their attention and comprehension. Avoid bombarding them with too much information, interrupting them or using complicated medical terms.

Speak clearly in a normal tone, never shout or in a raised voice. Ask if the person has heard and understood you.

Speak directly to the person, using eye-contact, allowing them to see your mouth movements clearly. Ensure that hearing aids are functioning. Many people with difficulties hearing may aid their comprehension with lip-reading and gestures.

Be aware of any visual deficits and compensate appropriately, such as ensuring there is adequate lighting, that they have their eyeglasses or contact lens, and that written instructions are at the level of the person’s ability and in their language.

Be sensitive to cultural backgrounds and differences. Check if an interpreter is needed. Try to learn a few basic words in the language of linguistically diverse people within your care.

Be mindful when discussing sensitive topics such as mental health issues, sexuality, incontinence, etc. Use a universal, nonthreatening approach that frames the subject as a common concern of many older people, such as, “Many people experience ...” or “Some people taking this medication have trouble with...”.

It is important to work in ways that respect the older person’s privacy and dignity. This includes talking to the person not their family members.

In Montessori environments, when we start working with an older person on an activity or role, we begin by inviting them to join us doing the activity. We then invite them to participate.



Video: Inviting Elders to Participate in the Montessori Approach

Talking less and demonstrating more is important so the person doesn’t have to concentrate on what you’re saying as well as what you’re doing.



Video: The Montessori Principles

After an activity, ask “Did you enjoy that?” and “Would you like to do this again another time?”

Montessori for Dementia, Disability and Ageing

Visit our website to find out more about supporting well-being through the four **Key Principles** of Montessori for Dementia, Disability and Ageing: Self-Esteem, Independence, Choice and Meaningful Engagement. Each **Key Principle** is outlined with **Essential Elements** and then has detailed **Guidelines** to assist with implementing these principles within home and care settings.



Website: Information and resource for [Guideline: Respectful Language](#)