

How To: Respond to the R-Word

Created by: The National Youth Activation Committee
Special Olympics Project UNIFY®

How to approach it: If others should use the R-Word (retard or retarded), it is important to know how to respond appropriately without being defensive or angry. Knowing what to say, especially when dealing with different groups of people, is a critical component in getting your message across effectively and respectfully.

Dealing with different groups of people:

Peers - If someone your age argues with you about the R-Word campaign, consider sharing your perspective. Tell them your story and about your involvement to show them why it is hurtful to you and then explain how the word, and similar attitudes, is hurtful to others too. Explain to them clearly and calmly that social injustice is always wrong and that everyone deserves to be treated with respect. No one deserves to be made fun of. Make sure your tone is friendly and do not sound like you are talking down to them.

Adults/Authority Figures - It is important to always be courteous and respectful. Everyone can have different opinions, as we certainly do not have to agree, nor do we want to argue. Judging someone for not agreeing with you will not help. Make sure they are aware that use of the R-Word is a form of social injustice; it devalues people with intellectual disabilities and hurts those with and without intellectual disabilities. It may be helpful to tell them about your personal experience with the campaign. Respecting their opinion is important to reaching an understanding; you must be careful to not sound condescending or rude. It may be better to approach an authority figure alone to discuss their use of the R-Word so it does not look like you are attempting to put them down or be disrespectful in front of a group.

Strangers- If you hear a stranger use the R-Word, gauge the situation to see if it is appropriate to respond. If the environment or person seems unreceptive or unsafe, it may not be a good time to spread the word - safety is always important. It is best to approach strangers only if you are in a situation in which they seem approachable and where you may be in their company for an extended amount of time. For instance, if you are walking by someone on the street and someone says the R-Word, that may not be an appropriate time to speak out. However, if you are at a party and someone is constantly using the R-Word, it may be okay to speak up! Be friendly, polite and explain the cause.

Common Arguments:

“I have freedom of speech, so I can say whatever words I want!”

Response- You may have freedom of speech, but is that any excuse to bully someone? Just because you can say something, doesn't mean that you should, especially when it may hurt someone's feelings; having the right to do something doesn't mean it's the right thing to do.

“It's just a word --How is it different than any other swear word?”

Response- The R-Word is different from most swear words because it specifically targets a select group of people. That makes it especially harmful, unlike other swear words that don't target any specific group.

“I use that word to make a negative statement about something, it's usually not towards a person.”

Response – Using the R-Word in a negative manner to put down someone or something is a derogatory use of the word. You are hurting someone's feelings, as using that word negatively belittles people with intellectual disabilities.

“How can saying “retard or retarded” be social injustice?”

Response – When we use a word to categorize an individual, or object, in a demeaning or disrespectful way, we are disregarding those people. Those individuals have the same hopes and dreams as we do, so why would we want to demean them by minimizing their value in our society? That is the social injustice – they often don't have the same opportunities as we do in school, community living or employment. Just saying that word reinforces the limitations we impose on them. Our goal is to include everyone equally, fairly, treat them with respect, and not limit anyone to a stereotype.

Key Messages and Talking Points:

- Young people like myself from all around the world are taking a stand in raising awareness about the dehumanizing and hurtful effects of the words “retard” or “retarded” and are helping encourage others to think before they speak!

- We ask that YOU help us change the conversation and help eliminate the demeaning use of the R-Word from today's speech and replace it with "respect." We are asking for your help in creating a more accepting world for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and all those people that may appear different, but have unique gifts and talents to share with the world.
- We're asking every person - young and old – to help eliminate the demeaning use of the R-Word—a common taunt used to make fun of others. Often unwittingly, the word is used to denote behavior that is clumsy or hopeless. However, whether intentional or not, the word conjures up a painful stereotype of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. It hurts. Even if you don't mean it that way.
- People with intellectual and developmental disabilities are fully capable of enjoying and sharing life experiences – listening to music, playing video games, watching the latest movies, and yes, having fun – as well as working together toward athletic excellence and one-to-one friendships as demonstrated constantly through Special Olympics and Best Buddies International. They can attend school, work, drive cars, get married, participate in decisions that affect them, and contribute to society in many positive ways.
- Special Olympics' Multi-National Public Opinion Study of Attitudes toward People with Intellectual Disabilities, conducted by Gallup, reveals that throughout the world, over 60 percent of people *still* believe that people with intellectual disabilities should be segregated in schools and in the workplace. This is intolerable. We need massive attitude change now to attack and reverse the stigma that is destructive to the lives of people with intellectual disabilities and a barrier to their growth.
- Did you know that by casually using the word "retard(ed)" to refer to an action as less than ideal you are making someone with an intellectual disability feel less than human - whether you mean to or not? Demeaning any of our fellow human beings by using inappropriate words toward any population negatively impacts all of us.

For more information, please visit www.r-word.org.