



## POSITION STATEMENT

### **The importance of person-first language**

Stop It Now! is committed to using person-first language, which describes behavior rather than labeling a person. People are much more complex than a single label, and a label suggests that behavior is permanent. Instead, by naming behaviors, we allow and expect a person to change over time. Language directly impacts how people feel about themselves and others, and we use it carefully and thoughtfully.<sup>1</sup>

We use and encourage the use of the terms “adult who has sexually abused a child,” “children engaging in problematic sexual behaviors,” and “individuals who commit a sexual offense,” instead of the terms such as pedophile, perpetrator, rapist, sex offender or abuser. Similarly, we prioritize the term “adult who was sexually abused as a child” over the labels victim or survivor, because people are much more than what was done to them as a child. That said, we honor the language these individuals choose to identify themselves.

Stop It Now! works to reduce the barriers to prevention efforts in personal relationships, communities, and in societal perceptions and practices. We know that when we use terminology that labels a person by their behavior or another single identifier, it becomes more difficult to see the uniqueness and humanity of that person. If we cannot see the humanity in the people we care about, it is difficult to envision that they can change.

The use of person-first language is not intended to disrespect those who have experienced sexual harm or minimize the impact of those who have caused sexual harm. Likewise, person-first language does not remove accountability from people who have caused sexual harm. To the contrary, accurately labeling the behavior encourages individuals to hold themselves accountable for harm they have caused, it makes it clear what actually has happened, it gives a voice to the trauma, and it does not hide behind labels, while offering hope that with the right intervention, people can change their behaviors.

Person-first language is especially critical when addressing children and youth who engage in problematic sexual behaviors. Young people’s identity is easily influenced by the perceptions of who they are by people they respect, care for and depend on. A young person’s positive self-identity, self-esteem and self-worth can be severely damaged when labels are used to describe them as a person, as opposed to describing their behavior.

We believe that person-first language encourages individuals to see themselves and others as whole, complex people. We hope to reinforce their agency and ability to feel hopeful, confident, and capable of living a safe, healthy life.

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<sup>1</sup> Gwenda M. Willis (2018) Why call someone by what we don't want them to be? The ethics of labeling in forensic/correctional psychology, *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 24:7, 727-743, DOI: 10.1080/1068316X.2017.1421640