

history of the word retarded

Retarded is a term that has undergone significant evolution over the years, reflecting changes in societal attitudes, medical understanding, and cultural sensitivity. Originally derived from the Latin word "retardare," which means "to delay" or "to slow down," the word has transitioned from a clinical description to a pejorative term. This article delves into the history of the word "retarded," exploring its origins, usage in various contexts, and the implications of its transformation in contemporary society.

Origins of the Word

The roots of the word "retarded" can be traced back to the Latin verb "retardare." In the 14th century, the French adopted the term as "retarder," which also meant "to delay." The word began to take on a more specific meaning in relation to intellectual and developmental disabilities in the late 19th century.

Early Usage in Medical Contexts

In the early 20th century, "retarded" was incorporated into psychological and medical vernacular as a clinical term to describe individuals with cognitive impairments. The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) formalized this usage in their classification systems. The term "mental retardation" became widely accepted and was used in educational, medical, and legal contexts to identify individuals with below-average intellectual functioning.

Changing Perceptions

As the understanding of intellectual disabilities evolved, so did the language used to describe them. By the 1960s and 1970s, advocacy groups began to push back against the medical community's use of "retarded," arguing that it was stigmatizing and derogatory. This shift in perception was influenced by broader civil rights movements, which sought to eliminate discrimination based on various characteristics, including disability.

Legislative Changes

In response to changing societal attitudes, several key pieces of legislation were enacted in the United States to address the rights of individuals with

disabilities.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Originally passed in 1975 as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, IDEA mandated that children with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education. This legislation played a crucial role in advocating for the rights of individuals labeled as "retarded," emphasizing their right to be educated in inclusive environments.

Rosa's Law

In 2010, Rosa's Law was signed into law, officially removing the term "mental retardation" from federal health, education, and labor policy. It replaced the term with "individual with an intellectual disability." This landmark decision underscored a growing recognition of the need for more respectful and accurate language when discussing intellectual disabilities.

The Shift to "Intellectual Disability"

With the growing movement to reform language around disabilities, "retarded" has largely fallen out of favor. The term "intellectual disability" has become the preferred terminology in both clinical and everyday contexts.

Reasons for the Shift

The shift from "retarded" to "intellectual disability" can be attributed to several factors:

- **Stigmatization:** The term "retarded" became associated with negative stereotypes, leading to its rejection in favor of more neutral language.
- **Advocacy Movements:** Advocacy groups have played a significant role in promoting language that emphasizes respect and dignity for individuals with disabilities.
- **Educational Reforms:** As educational practices evolved to be more inclusive, the language used in educational settings also changed to reflect this inclusivity.

Contemporary Usage

While "retarded" is still used in some contexts, particularly in colloquial language, it is widely considered offensive and outdated. Many advocacy groups, individuals with disabilities, and their families actively discourage its use. Instead, terms like "individual with an intellectual disability" or "individual with developmental delays" are preferred.

Impact of Language on Society

The evolution of the word "retarded" serves as a powerful example of how language shapes societal attitudes toward disability. Words carry weight, and the language we use can either empower or marginalize individuals.

The Role of Media and Pop Culture

Media representation of individuals with disabilities has also played a significant role in shaping public perception. In the past, characters labeled as "retarded" were often depicted in a stereotypical and negative light. However, as awareness and advocacy have increased, more nuanced and positive representations have emerged.

- **Positive Representation:** Films and television shows that portray characters with intellectual disabilities in a realistic and respectful manner have contributed to changing perceptions.
- **Awareness Campaigns:** Campaigns like "Spread the Word to End the Word" aim to raise awareness about the harmful effects of derogatory language.

Encouraging Respectful Language

As society continues to evolve, it is crucial to promote language that respects the dignity of all individuals, including those with disabilities. Here are some guidelines for using respectful language:

1. Use person-first language: Emphasize the individual before their disability (e.g., "individual with an intellectual disability" instead of "retarded person").
2. Avoid outdated terms: Refrain from using "retarded" and other outdated language that perpetuates stigma.

3. Educate others: Encourage discussions about the importance of respectful language in your community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the history of the word "retarded" reflects broader societal changes in the understanding and treatment of individuals with intellectual disabilities. From its origins as a clinical term to its current status as a pejorative, the journey of this word highlights the importance of language in shaping perceptions. As we move forward, it is essential to continue advocating for respectful and inclusive language that recognizes the dignity and humanity of all individuals, ensuring they are represented and treated with the respect they deserve.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the origin of the word 'retarded'?

The word 'retarded' comes from the Latin word 'retardare', which means 'to delay' or 'to hold back'. It was first used in English in the early 19th century.

How was 'retarded' originally used in medical contexts?

In the early 20th century, 'retarded' was adopted in medical terminology to describe individuals with intellectual disabilities, specifically those with delayed mental development.

When did the term 'retarded' start to become viewed as offensive?

The term began to be viewed as offensive in the late 20th century, particularly as advocacy groups for individuals with disabilities pushed for more respectful language.

What are some alternative terms that have replaced 'retarded'?

Alternative terms that are now preferred include 'intellectual disability', 'developmental disability', and 'cognitive impairment'.

What role did advocacy groups play in changing the perception of the word 'retarded'?

Advocacy groups highlighted the negative connotations and stigma associated with the term 'retarded', leading to a broader societal shift towards more respectful language.

How has the usage of 'retarded' evolved in popular culture?

In popular culture, 'retarded' has often been used derogatorily, leading to backlash and calls for sensitivity in language, particularly in media and entertainment.

What legislation addresses the use of the word 'retarded'?

In the United States, the 'Rosa's Law' was enacted in 2010, which officially replaced the term 'mental retardation' with 'intellectual disability' in federal health, education, and labor policy.

Why is it important to be mindful of language evolution regarding terms like 'retarded'?

Being mindful of language evolution is important to promote inclusivity and respect for individuals with disabilities, recognizing the impact words can have on societal attitudes.

What resources are available for learning about respectful language for disabilities?

Resources include organizations like the National Down Syndrome Society, the American Psychological Association, and various advocacy groups that provide guidelines and educational materials.

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