

# What's in a Name?

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

See the third-grade boy having fun, playing with his classmates at recess? Sometimes his pals give his wheelchair a push, other times he wheels himself. Their teacher, Mr. McHale, arrives to escort his students back to class, and he calls out to the boy, "Hey, Hollywood, let's round 'em up and move 'em out!" Hollywood grins, and his eyes light up behind his sunglasses.

The boy was very light sensitive, and the large, dark glasses shielded his eyes from the bright sun. He loved movies (and was quite a ham), and his teacher thought he looked cool—like a Hollywood star—in his oversized dark shades, so he nicknamed the boy Hollywood, and he named him well.

Some might have referred to the boy—my son, Benjamin—as the wheelchair boy, crippled kid, sped student, CP kid, or some other offensive descriptor. But to his teachers and classmates, he was Hollywood—he wore the name proudly—and what a difference the name made!

What about you? Are you the PTA Prez, Yankee Bob, Hot Mamma, or maybe something more generic, like the sports nut, the scrap-booker, or the church lady? Maybe you have different descriptors: one with family, another at work, and a different one when you play.

Maybe you named yourself or someone else named you, but whatever the descriptor, it's most likely something relevant and meaningful that says something positive about you. (If others gave you a negative label, hopefully they don't use it in front of you, and shame on them for using it at all.)

Can we do the same for people with disabilities? Let's use nicknames that tell us something positive, interesting, or unique about the person, instead of a medical diagnosis (CP kid, retarded, autistic, Down's, etc.) or a pejorative characteristic (hair-puller, head-

banger, foul-mouthed, aggressive, manipulative, etc.). What difference could this make in a person's life?

Imagine the outcome when Mr. McHale met with the fourth-grade teacher to discuss the next school year for my son, and he talked about *Hollywood*—instead of the CP kid or something else. Mr. McHale presented Benjamin as a delightful, funny, and talented boy, so that's how the fourth-grade teacher was introduced to him. His nickname and the positive characteristics shared were more important and more valuable, and they revealed more about him, than the diagnosis.

As we change, nicknames change. Later, Hollywood was replaced by HeroMan because of my son's love of super-heroes. Other affirmative descriptors followed (including College Man and Handsome).

It's critical to ensure that any nickname used is positive, and is also embraced by the person so named. During my own childhood, being called Motor Mouth was not pleasant.

Is there a Hollywood in your life, or maybe a Superstar, Pizza Guy, Book Lover, Baseball Boy, or Pink Lady? What if we saw Mary's love of wearing pink as a unique passion, instead of an inappropriate obsession? Don't people *without* disabilities have unique passions that are valued and/or respected?

Imagine sharing information about a child or adult with a disability that *begins* with a positive, interesting, respectful nickname at a team meeting, or when introducing the person to someone new. Imagine using that term on a regular basis with the person ("Hey, Hollywood!").

The words used about us can have a powerful impact. People can evolve and grow in positive ways when positive terms are used, and they can rebel and react in negative ways when negative terms are used. What outcomes do we want?