Anti-racist decolonizing framework for talking about and describing young people

a guide for organizations, funders, educational institutions, and media outlets

If you are planning to describe or talk about young people in any type of communication (program description, request for proposal, article, or any other media outlet) ask yourself the following questions:

1. Are young people represented in the process? Do they have space or opportunities to represent themselves in the words that will be used to describe them?

2. Do the words seek to fix, blame, shame, or change the young person OR do they seek to address the oppressive systems that impact the young person and their communities? Words that put the onus on young people—and not the system—are never good.

3. Are the words racialized? Do the words have a racist or colonialist implication? Are the words steeped in a racist or colonialist past? An example is the phrase “at risk.” Close your eyes and say the word or phrase. Does a picture of a particular young person or group of young people come to mind? If so, stop and pick another word.

4. Do the phrases objectify the young person vs. phrases naming the conditions they are experiencing? Distinguish between calling them a name and describing what they are experiencing. Example: Marginalized youth vs. youth who have experienced marginalization

5. How am I framing the words? What is the context and culture I am creating and perpetuating by using these words? Are the words positioning young people to live in their personal and collective power while addressing systemic oppression? Changing the words without changing the ideology behind the words is unacceptable. Words should never place young people in conditions that are not natural or inherent to them. Rather, words or phrases should call attention to the conditions that young people are being subjected to. Example: Calling a young person “disenfranchised” is not their natural condition. However, “disenfranchisement” is something that many poor Brown and black young people have historically and are currently being subjected to.

6. Do the words dehumanize the young person and their community? Words that take away agency, self-determination, and personal power are never good to use. We have been socialized to make clear assumption about “other” human beings, especially those who are brown and Black around the world. These assumptions play out on an economical, social, cultural, and educational level. Therefore, you have to do the work to ensure and recognize your assumptions and how they show up in the descriptions of young people and their communities.

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Words should be asset-driven, human-focused, and center on the wholeness of the young person.

**Deficit-based language**

Love and Peace program serves at-risk youth ages 15 to 26.

We work to empower these marginalized young people by providing them civic engagement training.

**Asset-based language**

Love and Peace program serves young people ages 15 to 26 who are experiencing marginalization due to systemic barriers.

We work with young people to bring about their personal power as they work to change these systemic barriers through understanding and actualizing civic engagement.

Words have the power to change how youth leaders, funders, and community members view and interact with young people at the most basic level. Even if the intention is positive, the words contain racist and colonialist ideologies, which perpetuate false notions about who is at fault (the young person and their communities) and who has the solution (the funder/the organization).

Youth are not:
- At-Risk
- Juvenile Delinquents
- Dysfunctional
- Violent
- Thugs
- Illegal
- Troubled
- Underrepresented
- A minority
- Disenfranchised
- Drop outs
- Apathetic
- Reckless
- Wayward

The information found in this guide comes out of the *We Are Not At-Risk* global campaign.

For more information please visit [afsc.org/notatrisk](http://afsc.org/notatrisk)