



Style and Messaging Guide

Purpose

To ensure high-quality, consistent messages in all electronic and printed materials aligned with our mission and values.

Child Care Aware Mission and Values

We are a statewide early childhood leader driving change through partnerships to build an equitable, high-quality early care and education system that meets the needs of Minnesota's families and children. We work with integrity, honor diverse ideas and approaches, and foster a culture of respect and trust. We are child-centered and equity-driven.

Tone

The tone of Child Care Aware of Minnesota's communications should be matter-of-fact, respectful, free of jargon, and reflect the mission and values of the organization.

Style Standards

Design standards, including specific brand colors, fonts, logo standards, and photo usage recommendations are outlined in the *CCAoA Brand Guide Update* available in the Communications and Marketing folder on our shared Google site. Templates for documents and PowerPoint presentations are also available in the same folder; please use these whenever possible rather than creating your own.

Generally, Child Care Aware of Minnesota copy follows the Associated Press Stylebook unless otherwise specified below. Content for the public should be written at or below an 8th-grade reading level; content for employees, partners, and other professionals can be written at or below a 12th-grade level. Materials should be written with plain language standards in mind. (See Appendix A for suggested guidelines from the Minnesota Department of Human Services Plain Language Initiative.) Organization names and other abbreviated terms should be written out on first use followed by the acronym in parentheses, and then are abbreviated on second use, e.g., "National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)" or "Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)."

We recommend that staff check any document written for an external audience by using Grammarly. If you have questions about how to access or use this application, please contact the MarComm team.

Co-Branding

Additional logos should generally be avoided to alleviate confusion. However, specific audiences or circumstances may warrant the inclusion of a partner logo, such as DHS.

Terminology

The terms outlined below are frequently used by Child Care Aware of Minnesota. Terminology used by partners, such as the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS), Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), Achieve MNCPD, Develop, etc. may differ. Contact the MarComm team with questions.

- **Center-based child care, child care center(s).** Note hyphen between “center” and “based.” May shorten to “center(s)” after first use.
- **Child Care Aware of Minnesota Coordinating Office.** May shorten to “Coordinating Office” after first use. Do not abbreviate as “CO.”
- **Child Care Aware of Minnesota.** Use when referring to the system as a whole (Coordinating Office *and* districts/regions). Abbreviate as CCAoMN after first use.¹ Do not use “Child Care Aware of MN.” Do not use “Child Care Aware” without appending either a national or state designation.
- **Child care.** Use two words, no hyphen, no capitalization. Do not use “childcare,” or “child-care.” Do not use “day care.”
- **Early childhood educator(s).** Preferred term instead of “providers” when referring to individuals or groups of individuals. When referring to programs, use “child care programs,” or “family child care programs,” or “child care centers.” When referring to the profession as a whole, use “early childhood care and education,” “the early childhood field,” “early childhood professionals,” or “the early childhood workforce.”²
- **Family child care.** May abbreviate to FCC after first use.
- **Language references.** Use “Early educators who do not speak English as a first language” for a group as a whole. Otherwise, be as specific as possible: “Spanish-speaking early educator” or “Somali-speaking early educators.” Do not use “ELL.”
- **Leadership references.** Use “Early childhood program leaders” or “early childhood program leadership.” Be specific about roles when possible, e.g., “center directors” or “directors of learning.”
- **Parents.** Use “families” whenever possible, as this is a more inclusive term for all of the people who may have responsibility for and be caring for children.
- **Person-First Language.** We generally prefer to use person-first language when appropriate, e.g., “children with disabilities” rather than “disabled children,” or “children living in low-income families” rather than “poor children,” etc. Please see Appendix B for more information about equitable language.
- **Provider(s).** Do not use unless referencing language from other partners or programs that use this term, such as DHS, or the Child Care Assistance Program. When referring to *programs*, use “child care and early education programs,” or “family child care programs,” or “child care centers.” May shorten to “program” or “center” after first use. When referring to *people*, use “early childhood educators” or “early educators.”³
- **Place/agency names.** Do not capitalize words referring to a political subdivision, law, person, institution, or place if they are not part of a proper name. Do not capitalize them when they refer back to a capitalized proper name. For example: the state, the department, the county, the university, the legislature.
- **Racial/Ethnic descriptions.** Child Care Aware of Minnesota generally follows AP Style guidelines for usage. Remember to be as specific as possible and to respect the preferred usage of the groups about whom you are writing. Please see Appendix B for more information about equitable language.

¹ This usage is consistent with Child Care Aware of America, which is abbreviated CCAoA.

² This language aligns with NAEYC’s [Power to the Profession](#).

³ This language aligns with NAEYC’s [Power to the Profession](#).

Appendix A.

Minnesota Department of Human Services Plain language initiative

To make Minnesota government better for the people it serves, DHS is committed to communicating plainly. DHS has a Plain Language team and a plan to train staff in plain language techniques is in the works. Watch for changes in notices, forms, website content, reports, log letters and more as this initiative is rolled out agency wide.

To communicate in plain language:

- Use common language, not technical jargon.
- Write clear and concise sentences.
- Name programs in full and avoid acronyms.
- Make the information people need easy to find and easy to understand.
- Simplify whenever possible.

Practical tips

Think of plain language as the practice of continuous clarification. How's that done?

Get to the point

- Know your purpose.
- Put your audience's need first.
- Put the most important information at the top.
- Use headings and subheadings to help steer readers.
- Use lists, tables and question-and-answer formats.
- Stick to what's necessary. Eliminate what's not.

Write well

- Use a sentence to convey only one idea.
- Choose words people know.
- Explain technical words or concepts that you cannot avoid.
- Use active voice.

Design carefully

- Use DHS standard fonts (Arial and Times New Roman). *(Does not apply to CCAoMN)*
- Use upper- and lower-case letters, not all capital letters.
- Use line lengths, margins and line spacing that are appropriate to the text.

Listen up

- Show documents to others and ask for their feedback.
- Read your content out loud.
- Emphasize the positive.
- Address your readers directly in a straightforward and upfront way.

DHS Equitable language guidelines

Language rooted in equity

In 2021, the Early Learning Network published a guide for centering racial equity in educational settings. While the guide was developed for early education researchers, the language considerations are relevant to Child Care Services. The following language considerations have been taken and adapted from the Early Learning Network's [A Language Guide to Center Racial Equity in Education Research](#).

Topic	Widely used language	Alternative language	Notes
Income-related	Low-income students and families, underprivileged, underserved, urban and inner-city (when intended to describe students' income and not their geographic location)	Children from families with incomes at 200% of federal poverty threshold (or whatever other threshold describes the group); families with low incomes; families experiencing poverty; children from households with low incomes; economically marginalized; economically disadvantaged	This language isn't person-centered. According to Associated Press Style 7th edition: "... terms such as 'low-income' and 'poor' have historically served as implicit descriptors for racial and/or ethnic minority people" (p. 148).
Group-related	Minority, minorities	Historically marginalized population; marginalized groups; historically excluded groups; minoritized populations	Some scholars and practitioners have shifted away from the term "minority" due to the concerns that these populations have been subjected to minoritizing practices and policies. This begins to shift the conversation to the individual experiencing the minoritization and to the systems that created it. It also creates a sense of inferiority where people hold less value on "minorities." It is coded for "race," "ethnicity" and "people with disabilities."
Group-related	Majority	Historically majoritized population, majoritized groups	Some scholars and practitioners have shifted away from the term "majority" due to concerns that these populations have been advantaged or privileged – majoritized – by practices, policies and ideologies. This begins to shift the conversation to the individuals and groups being majoritized and to the systems reinforcing it. It also creates a sense of superiority where people hold more value on those in the majority; it is coded for race, ethnicity and non-disabled people.
Challenge-related	Struggling students/readers/learners, troubled, at-risk/, high needs	Students building foundational reading skills; students for whom teachers report higher levels of behavior problems; students who need more supports; students who benefit with more support Define what students might be at-risk for and clarify the measurement that was used to make that determination. Use	This language isn't person-centered. The term "struggling reader" doesn't inform instruction; it is not a fixed characteristic for students and may be used to perpetuate deficit perspectives that continue on with students throughout schooling (deficit orientation). In addition, the terms "troubled," "at-risk" and "needy" are similarly defined by a broader set of values and are also not fixed characteristics.

		precise language about how students were identified (e.g., defined as “needing intensive support”).	
Achievement-related	Achievement gap	Disparities; opportunity gap; education debt	This language ignores cultural differences and diversity, and doesn’t take into account the lack of opportunities for many children outside the classroom.
Language-related	English learners/Limited English Proficiency	Dual language learner; students who speak more than one language, bilingual and multilingual	These terms center English as the benchmark for successful language acquisition and use a deficit model of thinking about children’s language abilities (language-as-problem orientation). Dual language learners may face linguisticism, or racism based on one’s language or accent.
Characteristics-related	Diverse (to describe children who are not white)	The term “diverse” is context-specific. In settings where the children come from all racial/ethnic backgrounds, “diverse” is an accurate description. In settings where most of the children are not white, it would be more appropriate to describe the sample based on their particular demographics and name what type of diversity (such as racially diverse or ability diverse)	The term “diverse” is veiled and non-specific, and is often used to describe children of color. It is more accurate to specifically name the demographic composition of the group. If indeed, the group is diverse (there are students from all demographic groups represented equally), then it would be appropriate to use the term “diverse.”
Skill-related	School readiness, ready for kindergarten	Although this language is commonly used by researchers and policymakers, there are opportunities to shift to alternative language that may better support diversity, equity and inclusion goals by being more specific. For example, rather than writing “Pre-K boosts school readiness,” write “Pre-K boosts language and literacy skills.” Alternative language includes thriving learners; thrive as learners; succeed as learners, successful learners. See the Successful Learner’s Equation for more information.	There is no clear consensus about what school readiness entails. Some of the components of traditional descriptions of “school readiness” are based on standards that are not inclusive or equitable. They assume some early learning experiences — like center-based pre-K and academically-oriented programs — make students ready for school. However, students without those experiences may still be ready for school in their own communities and have a host of other competencies not captured in this description. “School readiness” frames that children need to be ready for school based on assessments of academic skills that may not be commonly taught or supported in some early learning contexts, when in reality, access to school is typically based on a child’s age.
Race- and ethnicity-related	Different race/ethnicities	Follow the examples of how people describe themselves.	Be specific about who you are talking about and who you are referring to. Be specific about how assessments were conducted to better reflect biases teachers and parents may bring when assessing children’s performance.

Below are additional equity language considerations brought forth from the Child Care Services Division.

Common word/phrase	Alternative	Notes
Master (like master list)	Main list, complete list	Avoid language that has racist and misogynistic ties
Stakeholder	Partners, interested parties, people involved or impacted by the project	This word has ties to colonists and may be upsetting to Indigenous populations
Shot in the dark	Chance, guess, hypothesis	Avoid language that is related to violence
Silver bullet	Way of solving a problem	Avoid language that is related to violence
Red flag	Area(s) of concern	Can be seen as derogatory for Native American people
Crazy	Mental illness, mental health, mental health episode	Do not use language that is derogatory to people experiencing mental illness

For more resources on equity language and inclusive vocabulary, check out the Center for Disease Control and Prevention [preferred terms for select population groups and communities](#).