Andrew is a special education student in first grade who requires special classroom support while in the regular setting. As a student with autism, he is considered a student with special needs. He requires a special behavior intervention plan for occurrences when his special behavior problems require special attention. When he is getting especially anxious, he is taken to a special location to avoid a special tantrum. His teacher and aid require special training in autism to attend to his special problems.

Joseph is a first-grade student at Williams Elementary. He is a strong reader, loves to talk about cars, and is on-target academically in most areas. As a student with autism, Joseph has some issues regarding attention, communication and sensory integration dysfunction that necessitate in-class support. He performs very well with appropriate supports—he participates fully in lunch, recess, assemblies and virtually all activities with his peers. He is happy, has a charming sense of humor and is well liked by many of his classmates as well as adults with whom he interacts.

Which of these students would you like to have in your class?

Well, Andrew and Joseph are in fact the same boy, Andrew Joseph Phillips. Both statements about him above are true, but which statement highlights the positives, and which portrays mainly the negatives? How special does the word “special” make Andrew seem to you?

Many people prefer the term “special needs” when referring to students with disabilities because they think it sounds “nice.” But what images does it really conjure? Does the term “special needs” sound so appealing to you that you would like your typically developing child to qualify for that label?

I've actually had people tell me, when my child has been referred to as “special needs”, “Well, my child is special, too and deserves just as much special treatment as yours.” Would they really want to trade with us? Would it really be worth it to have an IEP, a BIP, annual ARDs, tens of thousands of dollars each year in out-of-pocket expenses for therapy and medical treatment, anxiety over every-day activities that most parents can't even imagine, not to mention a paralyzing fear of what the future holds for your child, to get that “special” label?

I think not. Face it, when we say special needs, it's a euphemism that is used to distinguish children with differences and to obfuscate their individual strengths and challenges. It's a term that justifies our placing them in different “special” environments away from their “non-special” peers. It's a term that, while some would argue promotes compassion, also promotes pity, which almost universally adults with disabilities will tell you is NOT what they want.

When teachers, parents of other regular education students, daycare administrators, preschool directors, and even church Sunday School teachers hear the term “special needs,” many, if not most, picture a child whose needs are too “special” for them to cope with and, no thank you, I don't want that child included in my (or my child's) environment because well, their special needs are too great.

I know there are many individuals who do tremendous work on behalf of children with disabilities, and my son is extremely fortunate to be surrounded by many adults who see him as the unique child in the second paragraph, not the “special” child in the first.

Congress has said, “Disability is a natural part of the human experience.” They didn't call it a “special part,” they called it a “natural part.” As more individuals with disabilities attain the same freedom to be included as do those without disabilities, hopefully when the word “special” is applied to them, it will come to signify what is truly special about them - perhaps their intelligence, their kindness, their unique spirit, all of their talents, all of the dreams they have, and all of the choices they make - not their “special” disability. I don't really want people to refer to my son as “special needs”. I'd prefer they call him by his name - Andrew.