

Swap out symbol to change ‘heartset’ on the disabled

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SYMBOLS and labels matter in everyday life. They determine how we look at and shape our opinion on an area/subject. Children and persons with disabilities (PWD) often get labelled or typecast in symbols that are limiting and hinder their progress.

The common symbol we use to depict all children and PWD is the figure in a wheelchair. While only a small proportion of PWD have physical conditions, this has become the universal symbol for disability.

This symbol, introduced in the 1960s, is known as the International Wheelchair Symbol or International Symbol of Access. While useful, it conveys a passive outlook of the children or PWD – passively sitting in a wheelchair while waiting for someone to help or push them.



Symbols matter in everyday life. We are influenced by them overtly or subtly. They influence our outlook and responses. Many people in Malaysia see disability in negative terms. A study by the United Nations Children’s Fund Malaysia in 2017, on the knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of the community towards childhood disability, showed that most view it as “limited” or “not normal”, and tend to describe it in terms of these children’s limitations, and not abilities.

Internationally, there are attempts to change our outlook and symbols. Since 2010, Sara Hendren and Brian Glenney, co-founders of the Accessible Icon project, designed a new disability symbol that focuses more on the person and their ability. It is amazing what a small change can do to our outlook. This new symbol supports the reality that many children and PWD – whether physical, visual, hearing, intellectual, etc – have abilities. They are not passive recipients of society’s “charity” but active participants, ones who have the same rights as all Malaysians.

In Malaysia, we still have a long way to go, from looking at a child’s disability to looking at the child themselves and their abilities. In this respect, we are behind much of the developed and developing world. Re-symbolising our nation is one step in the right direction. I appeal to media outlets, corporate bodies, shopping complexes, government agencies, etc, to consider adopting this new symbol. It would be ideal if our government mandates the use of this symbol as the default symbol for disability.



Note that Hendren and Glenney have put this image in the public domain, [free for appropriation and use](#). Seeing this “proactive” symbol will help change the “heartset” of the average Malaysian.

Children with disabilities don’t need our pity, they need our support.

Children with disabilities don’t need charity, they need their rights met.

Children with disabilities don’t need to be viewed in limited ways, they need to be seen as children with abilities.

Thank you. – March 27, 2019.

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