
Our Actions... Their Futures

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

The nation's unemployment rate remains very low (4.6 percent as of May 2006). Immigrants (legal or not) who choose to come here can easily find work. The government says our economy is doing great. And the estimated unemployment rate of people with disabilities remains shamelessly high at 70-75 percent!

Adding insult to injury, consider the birth-to-death services for individuals with disabilities: early intervention for babies, special ed for children, vocational services for adults, and therapies and interventions for all ages. Billions of dollars are spent on these services and we end up with what? A 70-75 percent "failure rate"!

What we're doing is not working! We focus on helping people acquire "developmentally appropriate functional skills" (the able-bodied standard), based on the mistaken notion that unless and until a person with a disability can "do" this-or-that, he won't be allowed in regular ed classes, be included in the community, go to college, get a job, and on and on. We focus on what their bodies or minds can/should *do*, instead of helping a person *be and become* who she wants to be!

For example, a teacher in a life-skills class is still trying to teach her sixth- and seventh-graders to tie their shoes! *Who cares if they can tie their shoes, and how will this help them get jobs in the future?* They can wear slip-ons, pull-on boots, or shoes with Velcro, or they can walk around with their laces untied like other middle-schoolers! While the teacher spends time on this functional skill, students are not learning the academics they really need. This dismal situation is repeated in the lives of millions of others, when the focus is on skills of dubious value at the expense of what's really important.

Targeting short-term goals, like functional skills, represents a dangerous level of short-sightedness, and the system encourages this bad habit. Early intervention focuses on birth-to-3, and seldom looks beyond. Special ed preschools serve 3- and 4-year-olds, and they seldom look beyond—ditto special ed in elementary,

middle, and high schools. There's little or no continuity as children are moved up the ladder of services—few of us see the "whole person" across the lifespan. Within the different levels of services, we focus on functional skills—for the sake of achieving those skills—with little thought of whether these skills are really important for the child's long-term success.

Oh, we *think* we're thinking about the future, when we believe a child must learn to walk or talk or have "appropriate behavior" in order to be successful. I did, at one time. But when I met adults with disabilities whose power wheelchairs, service dogs, communication devices, and other supports helped them lead successful lives, I realized my then five-year-old son did *not* need to walk to have a good life! What he needed was a good academic education, and he also needed to learn how to live in the real world. Being pulled out of class for therapy and missing academics would *not* help him in the long run. But having power mobility so he could become more self-reliant and play with other kids and make friends at recess made a difference in his life at the time *and* laid a strong foundation for his success as a young adult—he's now in college.

The artificial standards imposed by the service system (including special ed) may be important *within* that system, but they're relatively unimportant in the Big Picture of life. What *is* important? Believing in yourself; having what you need so you can do what's important to you (such as an education,

as well as assistive technology, accommodations, etc.); and being around people who support your hopes and dreams. Think about your own life and what's helped you achieve success.

When will we reject the conventional wisdom (which is not so wise) that too often leads to the incarceration of people with disabilities in the gulag of second-class citizenship, lost dreams, and hopelessness?

What if *our* work was focused on *their* work in the future? What if—starting with babies—*everything we did* was guided by the presumption that children with

If you treat an individual as he is, he will stay as he is, but if you treat him as if he were what he ought to be and could be, he will become what he ought to be and could be.

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disabilities will grow into adults who can and should go to college and/or enter the workforce, and live the lives of their dreams? How would our actions be different?

We would toss out developmental scales once and for all, and recognize the value of assistive technology, supports, and accommodations. We would provide children (even little ones) with power wheelchairs, communication devices, and other tools so they can get on with their lives instead of spending years in therapy! And therapists would move from being hands-on providers to consultants who could help parents, teachers, and others learn how to help a child be who he wants to be and do what's really important to him.

Educators and parents would realize that students with disabilities need a real academic education so they can move on to vocational school, college, and/or enter the workforce (including starting their own businesses).

They may learn differently than other students, but *all* children are natural born learners! We can modify curriculum and provide the supports they need to ensure a good education—the foundation for later success.

We'll recognize the absolute necessity of children with disabilities being included in general ed classrooms and in community activities so they can learn how to get along in the real world. Segregated, self-contained classrooms or other "special" activities cannot prepare a child for life in the real world as an adult!

We won't worry so much about "appropriate social skills." We'll realize, for example, that a child who prefers his own company can be a successful adult via self-employment or in a job where there's little interaction with others. There are people *without* disabilities who prefer their own company, and they choose jobs where they work more-or-less alone. This is more of a "personal preference" than a "disability issue"!

We'll expect children with disabilities to take responsibility for their lives and make decisions as early as possible. We can no longer afford to keep children in a perpetual state of infancy and, again, we'll give them the assistive technology, supports, and other tools they need to live self-determined lives.

Perhaps most importantly, we'll spend lots of time talking to our children about their lives as adults, just as parents do with their children who *don't* have disabilities. Sitting around the dinner table, moms and dads will say things like, "When you grow up and live on your own... [or go to college, get married, drive a car, or a myriad of other things]," so our children will know we have big dreams and high expectations for them. It doesn't matter whether we "know" these things will really happen—*our parents* didn't know what *we* would achieve as adults, but hopefully they dreamed for us so we could learn to dream for ourselves!

Our belief system—not a person's disability—is the most important predictor of a person's success. For if we *believe* she can and should enjoy successful employment as an adult, we'll do what it takes to make that dream a reality! On the flip side, if we *don't* believe it can happen, it won't—not because

of the person's diagnosis, but because of our actions or inactions! How can we live with

ourselves—as parents, teachers, or professionals—knowing our work has contributed to preparing a child for nothing more than unemployment, helplessness, and dependence?

There are many ways to do things differently, so put your thinking cap on! And it's never too late to make changes in the lives of *adults*. Again, move beyond the status quo, and focus on what the person really needs so he can get the job he wants, live in the home of his choice with the supports he wants, and more.

Parents of children with disabilities and adults with disabilities can and should take the lead in this action. We can check everything we do by asking, "Are my actions going to lead to employment, or are they focused on meeting the artificial goals of the service system and wasting time?" And we can hope professionals get on board. But if they don't, we need to move on, even if that means getting out of the system and going our own way—alone and/or with the support of family, friends, and people in our communities.

So far, the *practices* of the service system have not lived up to the *promises*, as evidenced by the 70-75 percent unemployment rate. How much longer will we keep going down the path that leads to nowhere?

Children who are treated as if they are uneducable almost invariably become uneducable.

Kenneth B. Clark