

The Can-List

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

When my son, Benjamin, was very young, he was routinely assessed by professionals, like most children and adults with disabilities, and I was routinely disturbed by these assessments—they told me everything my son could not do. (*Duh!* Tell me something I didn't already know!) As a three-year-old with cerebral palsy, he couldn't sit up, crawl, or walk; didn't have the pincer grasp, protective reflexes, and more; and he had just started talking.

Benjamin was also a happy, funny, and determined kiddo with many abilities. Once he began to talk, he demonstrated an extraordinary auditory memory and the gift of mimicry: he perfectly recited dialogue from “Thomas, the Tank Engine” videos *with a British accent!*

But because the strengths he *did* have were not included in the developmental assessments, *they didn't count*. Thus, based on the tests, he looked like a failure. The child represented by test results was *not* the child we knew. So we declined formal assessments, opting for informal assessments instead. (See “After Formal Assessments: Do Not Pass Go” at www.disabilityisnatural.com/explore/children-families.)

We recognized the importance of focusing on what Benjamin *can* do, and building on those skills, instead of focusing on—and trying to “fix”—what he *cannot* do. A formal assessment given today would probably still show him as “deficient,” despite his being a successful 23-year-old college student, award-winning filmmaker, and more.

Who *is* the real person? The one who *can't*, or the one who *can*? Who are *you*? How much time do you spend trying to fix what you can't do? Isn't more time spent building on what you can do? Let's do the right thing: focus on what a child or adult with a disability *can* do by making a Can-List!

What should be included in the Can-List? A person's abilities, strengths, talents, and/or interests. Stay away from things like the pincer grasp, walking, crawling, reading level, appropriate behavior, etc., that reflect medical-model thinking. (You don't include that stuff when describing your strengths, do you?)

What does the person do well now or want to do? What about unique personality traits, hobbies, interests, and much more! Who should contribute to the list? The person with a disability and the family, plus teachers, friends, professionals, and/or others.

A Can-List creates a more accurate and positive perception of the person, not only in the eyes of others, but also in the eyes of that person. Imagine the possibilities when the Can-List is longer than the Can't-List!

The Can-List can also create new possibilities. What if the Can-List was the first discussion in a team meeting (IEP, ISP, etc.)? In

kindergarten, my son had difficulty picking up beans/marbles during counting lessons, but he easily picked up his beloved “Thomas” trains I sent from home.

If a boy collects sports trading cards, his parents and teachers could use those to help him with reading, math (using sports stats, players' numbers, etc.), and more. A middle-school girl who loves fashion, but struggles with reading, can be provided with fashion books, magazines, websites, etc.—she'll be motivated to read about what she loves. An adult who likes to cook (or who wants to learn) can take a cooking class, and that can open the door to friendships, which may lead to a job and more.

When time and effort are spent trying to “fix” a person's “deficits,” there's little time left for building on strengths. Time's a-wasting—let's get busy creating a Can-List and enjoy the extraordinary outcomes!

**Those who believe in our ability
do more than stimulate us.
They create for us an atmosphere in
which it becomes easier to succeed.**
John Lancaster Spalding