

In TV-Land every week, risk-taking men and women tackle unpleasant, yucky, and sometimes dangerous situations during reality show “contests.” The pay-off? Self-esteem, pride, money, and more. In the Real

World, ordinary men, women, boys, and girls also face difficult circumstances on a daily basis—taking a test at school, learning to drive (or holding your breath the first time your child drives alone), getting fired, getting hired, and a variety of other experiences that constitute being a human being in today’s world.

In *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Rings*, Frodo quoted one of his Uncle Bilbo’s favorite sayings, “It’s a dangerous business going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.” Yes, in the Real World, life is full of fear—but every day, most of us go out our doors and face the risks of daily life. We do this because life is also full of hope and promise, and in many situations, our hopes are realized *because* we’ve faced our fears and taken risks.

In Disability World, however, things are very different. Many children and adults with developmental disabilities are “protected” by the Gatekeepers (service providers, educators, and even parents) who are in control. And in these situations, people with disabilities are not allowed to take risks—not allowed to be in regular ed classrooms, live on their own, have Real Jobs, take care of themselves, and more. Fear—of failure, danger, or something else—puts the brakes on “risky” adventures.

Interestingly, it’s often the Gatekeepers—not the children or adults with disabilities—who are fearful. But “fear” may not be the word that’s used. Instead, a Gatekeeper may proclaim the person is unable to do [whatever], even though he’s never had the opportunity to try! On the other hand, the justification for continued “protection” may be placed on the shoulders of “the community” or “the school” or some other entity which is judged “not ready” to include and support a child or adult with a disability.

# Best Hopes, Worst Fears

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow

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In other cases, a person with a disability may have *once* had a Real Job in the community or been included in school, but it didn’t work out exactly as planned. When this occurs, the “failure” may be blamed on the

person with a disability, the Gatekeepers believe their fears were justified, and then decide, once and for all, that the person will never be successful in any inclusive setting, so no future opportunities are forthcoming.

In these situations, we employ a different set of rules for people with disabilities. In the Real World, when a person *without* a disability is fired from *one* job, is it assumed that she’s not employable in *any* job? No, we would most likely realize that, for whatever reasons, she and the job were not a good match, and she would be encouraged to seek another job, knowing that—like many others—she may have many jobs and even different *careers* throughout her lifetime.

Fear—rational or irrational—can prevent us from moving forward into new opportunities. When it comes to the lives of individuals who have disabilities, this can result in segregation, lost opportunities, undereducation, underemployment, and other negative outcomes, which may be life-long.

Our efforts may also be self-sabotaged by the widely-held belief that we shouldn’t hold onto “false hopes.” Gatekeepers of all types—including medical personnel—counsel parents and people with disabilities against having “false hopes.” (What are they afraid of, *on our behalf*?) And what happens when, for example, parents embrace this way of thinking? They (and other Gatekeepers) adopt a “realistic,” narrow-minded way of thinking, which limits the child’s opportunities for success. If Thomas Edison, Bill Gates, and others—both the famous and the ordinary—had been “realistic” and concerned with “false hopes,” would they have taken the risks they took, tried and tried again, and/or done whatever it took to achieve their dreams? Shouldn’t we be more concerned with the “*false fears*” that freeze us into immobility, rather than “false hopes”?

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What's lacking in so many scenarios involving people with disabilities are hope and optimism. We spend so much time being fearful, and so little time, if any, being hopeful and optimistic. It's as if "hope" and "disability" are mutually exclusive. But they aren't, and things don't have to be this way!

One solution to this quagmire is the BEST HOPES/WORST FEARS exercise. More than a decade ago, the elementary school that my children attended became an inclusive school via this strategy. The principal knew that educators had many fears. He also knew that until they addressed these fears, their efforts at inclusion might not succeed.

So here's what they did: over the course of several staff meetings, educators shared their BEST HOPES and their WORST FEARS with one another, writing them on flip chart paper which lined the walls of the room. In order for this method to bear fruit, staff members had to know they could speak honestly—that they wouldn't be chastised or ridiculed for their feelings. Through personal experiences, brainstorming, and open and respectful discussion, they learned that many of their fears were, indeed, "false fears." Then they openly and honestly talked about what it would take to make sure their BEST HOPES came true and their WORST FEARS didn't, and these were also listed on the flip chart paper and shared with all.

The BEST HOPES/WORST FEARS strategy can work for all of us. Any agency, organization, or school can use it as an effective strategy to move toward inclusion or other new ways of operating. An IEP, IHP, or other planning team can use it to ensure successful outcomes for a child or adult with a disability. And it's critically important that the person whose life is being discussed is an integral, active participant. We need to know what *her own* BEST HOPES and WORST FEARS are.

**It's as if "hope" and "disability" are mutually exclusive. But they aren't, and things don't have to be this way!**

We can share our BEST HOPES and WORST FEARS when thinking about a person with a disability having a Real Job or living in the community. Then we can employ techniques to ensure the BEST HOPES are realized and the WORST FEARS never come true.

Parents can use this strategy within their families and drive the demons of hopelessness and "false fears" away, once and for all. Tackling our BEST HOPES and WORST FEARS can launch us into action. For example, if parents are reluctant to allow their child to be included in school or other activities because the child doesn't have sufficient oral communication to be easily understood by others, they might decide it's time for a communication device. That fear is now gone. If they're fearful their child may never be able to live on his own, they might decide to start teaching the child how to cook, shop, balance his checkbook, and other self-sufficiency skills—banishing more fears!

When doing this exercise, you might discover that your BEST HOPES and WORST FEARS are flip sides of the same coin. One BEST HOPE, for example, might be that a person with a disability has friends, while one of the WORST FEARS is that the person will be alone. When we get these out in the open, share them with others, and brainstorm solutions, we'll ensure positive outcomes.

In the end, employing the BEST HOPES/WORST FEARS activity is what most of us do for ourselves (often unconsciously) on a daily basis. When we walk out our doors every day, we assess risks, decide which are acceptable or unacceptable (and which are based on "false fears"), and then do whatever it takes to ensure the risks we take result in a benefit.

Isn't it time to ensure people with disabilities have these same opportunities? Shouldn't they also be able to enjoy the dignity of risk, the power of learning from experience, and the benefits that come from living a self-directed life? Embrace the BEST HOPES/WORST FEARS strategy today and then enjoy the fruits of your labor!