

Relevant and Meaningful

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

From my computer dictionary: “relevant” means “closely connected or appropriate to the matter at hand;” and “meaningful” means “having a serious, important, or useful quality of purpose.”

Memorize “relevant and meaningful,” and make them part of your standard operating procedures in your relationships with children or adults who have disabilities. Then be ready for wonderful outcomes!

Years ago, in my children’s inclusive elementary school, there was great concern about a child with complex behavior needs being in a general education classroom. It wouldn’t work, right? The student would need to be in a self-contained classroom with a full-time aide, and special education teachers would need to closely follow the “behavior plan” in the student’s IEP (Individualized Education Program). *Not!* The school principal and his staff learned (through careful, patient, and *caring* trial-and-error) that when the student feels he belongs, believes he is valued, and is engaged in activities that are relevant and meaningful to him, “behavior problems” fade away!

When my son, Benjamin, was six, he received “water therapy” from a physical therapist (PT). Benj has cerebral palsy (the “sexiest” of the palsies, they say) and the water therapy in the wide, deep hot tub was supposed to help his body in many ways. Playing in a tub of warm water—who wouldn’t have fun doing that, right?

The PT was enthusiastic and positive as she held Benj in the water. Then she took a 6-inch weighted ring, dropped it, and exclaimed, “Uh-oh! I dropped the ring; would you please get it for me, Benjamin?” He said okay; most people like to be helpful. When he popped up and handed her the ring, she clapped her hands, and exclaimed, “Good job, good job!” This was followed by, “Uh-oh, I dropped it again...” But Benjamin refused to “help” a second time, despite the PT’s repeated urgings that quickly went

from enthusiastic to demanding. Knowing my son, it seemed he was thinking, “Lady, I helped you one time, but if you can’t hang on to that thing better, you’ll have to get it yourself.” This activity was not *relevant and meaningful* to Benjamin and he was not going to be coerced! But “playing games” with his dad and sister in our hot tub at home *was* relevant and meaningful to him, and these games had the same beneficial outcomes as water therapy.

When Benj was in the primary grades, learning to “tell time” was an important skill. By age 9, my son still couldn’t read an “analog” clock (a face with numbers and hands). Teachers had worked on this at school. At home, we had worked on it for years; we had every time-telling device known to mankind: Thomas the Tank Engine clocks, wooden clocks that I painted so my son could see the hands and numbers better (he has a low-vision diagnosis), time-telling games, and more. I made the executive decision to stop; maybe reading a clock face wasn’t something Benjamin could ever do. And while we were spending so much time on that one skill, he was missing out on learning other things!

The summer between third and fourth grades, “Lois and Clark” was his favorite TV show. Every afternoon was the same. “When is my show on, Mom?” “In 20 minutes,” I replied. Two minutes later he was back with the same question. This was repeated numerous times before the 4:00 PM show. It dawned on me that if you don’t know how to “tell time,” it’s hard to have a *concept* of time—how long is two minutes, how long is 20 minutes?

To save my own sanity, I bought Benjamin a *digital* watch with a large face, strapped it on his precious wrist, and told him now he would know when his show was on. It didn’t happen overnight.

“Mom, when is my show on?”

“What time does your watch say?”

“Oh-three-four-oh.”

**We only do well
the things we like doing.**

Colette

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“OK, that’s 3:40; it comes on in 20 minutes.”

“Mom, when is my show on?”

“What time does your watch say?”

“Oh-three-four-five.”

“That’s 3:45; it comes on in 15 minutes.” This went on for a week or two. Then one day:

“Mom, when does my show come on?”

“What time does your watch say?”

“Three-five-five. MOM—MOM! My show comes on in just FIVE MINUTES!”

He got it; and now he knew what five minutes or 20 minutes *felt like*. Hallelujah—I almost danced a jig!

I got it, too: I realized that knowing how to tell time was not relevant and meaningful to Benjamin *until that point in his life*, until there was something important—a TV show—happening in his life at a certain time. It might have been relevant and meaningful to other children at a younger age. But people are different—each of us is unique! Who made the rule about when it’s appropriate to learn to tell time? Today, Benjamin has earned his Associate’s degree (graduating with honors), and will soon earn his Bachelor’s degree; he still cannot tell time using a traditional clock face, but he doesn’t need to—he has his digital watch.

We may earnestly try to help a person with a disability learn certain skills or achieve the goals in an IEP or other I-plan. But our efforts are doomed if the activity or goal is irrelevant and meaningless to the person. Should we try to coerce, manipulate, or cajole a person into doing something, or—even worse—punish him if he doesn’t comply?

Commonsense alert: I’m not talking about things like learning math in the third grade, or having good

manners, or other “normal” activities or behaviors. If a third-grader doesn’t like math—like my son at the time—he doesn’t get a “pass.” He’s still expected to learn math, *and* it’s okay if he does math “his way”—different from the other third-graders.

Life is not a race; we don’t have to be in such a hurry. If a person is not doing such-and-such at a certain age, that doesn’t necessarily mean she’ll never do it. She may or may not need help learning to do it, but with or without help, she’ll do it when it’s relevant and meaningful to her.

In addition, there’s never only one way to do something; *there are many ways*. Let’s get creative; let’s consider assistive technology devices. Let’s talk to the people with disabilities in our lives and *really*

listen to what they say. Let’s also listen when they say “no”—whether they tell us verbally, or through their behavior, body language, or some other way—and let’s respect their preferences and autonomy.

Goals, activities, or whatever we’re trying to do on behalf of a person with a disability—all of it needs to be relevant and meaningful to the person, not to us. It’s not about our lives; it’s about theirs, right? What we think is important may not be important at all to the person with a disability. Whose life is it anyway?

Rather than try to impose our will on another, let’s try to see things

from the other person’s perspective. We might learn something! We can put aside our arrogance and be patient; we can be there to warmly assist when the person lets us know he’s ready to learn what’s relevant and meaningful to him.

Spend some time thinking about what’s relevant and meaningful in your life. Now think how you’d feel if someone more powerful than you tried to make you to do things that are irrelevant and meaningless to you. This is really not rocket science, is it?

It is not that I first learn and then act according to what I have learned, but learning is acting; the learning is not separate from acting...But if you have a system that tells you how to live, or a method that says, “Live this way,” then you are conforming to the method which is established by somebody else. Therefore you are not learning, you are conforming and acting according to a pattern, which is not action at all, it is just imitation.

J. Krishnamurti