

Maria, the mother of 7-year-old Sophie, was livid about the school's proposed IEP (Individualized Education Plan) for her daughter: Sophie would be in an elementary school Life Skills class with other children aged 6-10, where the students would spend time learning to make beds, fold towels, sort recycling, and other activities (of questionable value). Little time would be focused on reading, math, or other academics.

What, exactly, are Daily Living and/or Life Skills? Is there a universally-accepted definition? Similarly, is there a standard "curriculum" (not just "programs" that are sold to school districts)? I've asked these questions of many professionals, teachers, and parents of children and adults with disabilities, and there is no specific, commonly agreed-upon definition.

Yet, ensuring that children and/or adults with disabilities "achieve" or "master" Daily Living/Life Skills is high on the list of many parents, teachers, service providers, and others in the disability arena.

I've met thousands of people over the past 25-plus years while doing presentations across the country. When I've had conversations with others on this topic, here's a potpourri of what they say Daily Living/Life Skills include: shoe-tying, bed-making, cooking, washing dishes, money skills, personal hygiene (bathing, dressing, hair-combing, etc.), and much, much more.

Search the internet and you can find a variety of websites that sell curricula on the subject, as well as websites that list Daily Living/Life-Skills activities for students and/or adults with developmental disabilities. One website, to remain unidentified, listed "mopping [school] cafeteria floors, setting up [cafeteria] tables," and other activities for students.

Several websites noted that (I'm collectively paraphrasing): students with disabilities must be taught these skills *at school* because school is the only resource that can help them transition from being students to being productive adults. Interestingly, I found no reference that these same Life Skills were needed by students *without* disabilities.

Daily Living/ Life Skills

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This entire concept is rife with the presumption of incompetence of children/adults with disabilities *and* their families. First, why would anyone hold the belief that parents are incapable of helping their children with disabilities learn ordinary skills, but they're somehow capable of helping their children *without* disabilities learn these ordinary skills? (And let's recognize that these *are* ordinary

skills.) As a parent myself, it's insulting that "professionals" assume I'm incompetent to teach my son the same things I teach my daughter (who doesn't have a disability).

Other parents, however, may *not* feel insulted. They may, in fact, *feel incompetent*, while others may feel *it's not their responsibility* to teach these skills to their children. And how does this come about? When the parents of a very young child with a disability begin receiving early intervention (EI) services when the child is between birth and age 3, they may be overwhelmed with anxiety and even fear, based on the negative prognoses most receive from physicians when the child is diagnosed. This is followed by the swarm of EI professionals (service coordinators, therapists, etc.) who descend on the family's home for regular home visits, assess the child, write goals, and so forth.

Under these circumstances, and despite EI practices that are supposed to be family-focused, culturally sensitive, and more, the message to the parents is often very clear: you are incapable of raising your child without professional intervention, *and* your child/family is *entitled* to all kinds of professional help, now and probably for the rest of your child's life.

Some parents are able to accept this help *and* maintain their parental autonomy and authority. Others, however, are not. They *do* feel incompetent ("I'm just a parent, what do I know; surely the professionals know best...") and/or they're *relieved* that others ("experts") will bear some of the increased responsibilities that may come with raising a child with a disability. In either case, these parents relinquish some of their authority and responsibility, and the school system, not the family, assumes the role of the third parent,

2 - Daily Living/Life Skills

taking the responsibility for teaching the child Life Skills (*but not academics*).

Second, why do we assume children with disabilities are incompetent to learn Daily Living/Life Skills like their brothers and sisters do, from the ordinary experiences of daily family life? I didn't spend a great deal of time with my daughter on specific Life Skills. Most parents don't. For example, you help your child learn to cook when she's interested in it, knowing that when *you* left your family home, you probably didn't have A+ cooking skills. You knew enough to get by, and you learned by doing for yourself. Or maybe you *didn't* learn, and at some point, your spouse/partner made up for your lack of skills!

Why would we assume, as more than one website proclaimed, that a student with a disability can learn these skills *only* in a school setting? Are parents and children all presumed to be inherently incompetent? Where does this arrogance come from?

Third, why do we assume that a Life Skills education is more valuable than academics? We're all aware of the horrendous and shameful unemployment rate of adults with disabilities (75-90 percent). How is learning to tie your shoes going to get you a job? Are there any shoe-tying jobs? What about bed-making? That may be an important skill if one is to be a hotel housekeeper one day, but I doubt if "bed-making" is a *requirement* for being hired as a hotel housekeeper. No doubt the hotel will train its staff on how to make beds *per the hotel's standards*.

I was recently given a tour of a high school's "transition program." The assistant principal proudly shared how the students (aged 16-22) were learning how to sort things into bins so they'd be ready to move into a sheltered workshop when they aged out of special education.

A Life Skills education isn't going to lead to a paying job or to post-secondary education. Despite the Americans with Disabilities Act, employment discrimination exists. In any ordinary job, a person with a disability is competing against people without

disabilities. Thus, children with disabilities need a *great academic education* to prepare them for a real job and/or vocational or post-secondary education.

When my son, Benjamin, was very young, educators said he would be in the Ortho Class (for children with physical disabilities) when it was time for kindergarten. (I had already elected not to send him to the segregated special ed preschool.) They were proud of the Ortho Class where (they said) my son's needs would be met: lots of physical and occupational therapies, a focus on "functional" (physical) skills, etc. Unlike a general ed classroom, there were no shelves of books. Instead, the room was filled with therapy equipment, a television set (time for lots of videos in *this* classroom), mats for therapy and for nap-taking, etc. Thanks, but no thanks. We moved to a school district where Benjamin and other students with disabilities were all included in general ed classrooms where they received a quality academic education. Today, as a recent college graduate, Benjamin is on the job-hunt.

My son does not write with a pencil and he needs assistive technology, accommodations, and supports. He's earned a Master's degree. This would not have been possible with a Life Skills education.

Why aren't we ensuring children and adults with disabilities have the assistive technology, supports, and accommodations they need to succeed, instead of consigning them to a lifetime of lost opportunities, segregation, poverty, and second-class citizenship?

For adults with disabilities, why are service providers wasting time with Daily Living/Life Skills goals for cooking, bed-making, etc., instead of assisting the person with skills that will lead to a real job for real pay?

What hope is there if parents and/or educators have such low expectations for students with disabilities? If we, as responsible adults, do not ensure children with disabilities are given the same opportunities as children without disabilities to learn, grow, and succeed, we have failed them, miserably and perhaps totally, for life. How can we live with ourselves? It's time to start the conversation.

If you accept the expectations of others, especially negative ones, then you will never change the outcome.

Michael Jordan