



# NATURAL SUPPORTS AND GENERIC SERVICES: MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER!

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

According to the news, 48 states are facing massive financial shortfalls.

State legislatures are cutting services and programs across the board to deal with their budget crises. Many states already have waiting lists for services available to people with disabilities and their families; today's cuts are making an already bad situation worse, and there's no end in sight.

Under these circumstances, natural supports and generic services to meet the needs of people with disabilities and family members are more important than ever. We don't have to go without!

What *are* natural supports and generic services? The abundant supply of supports (from everyday people) and services (from ordinary organizations) that already exist in our communities, and which are used by people who don't have disabilities.

Consider all the possibilities in your neck of the woods—if you don't know what's available, get in the car and drive around, scour the Yellow Pages, and ask others. We often don't know about the bounty in our communities because we've depended on the service system for almost everything, and we've never looked to see what's in our own backyards! Parks and Recreation departments, churches, hobby/interest clubs, service clubs, nonprofit organizations, local businesses, libraries, museums, and other entities are all potential sources of natural support and/or generic services.

Regarding employment, people with disabilities can be encouraged or helped to find jobs the way people without disabilities find them: through networking, newspaper ads, etc. Self-employment (as described by Cary Griffin in the "Becoming a Business Owner" article) is an exciting and viable option.

Every community boasts hobby and other clubs. When adults with disabilities become connected with everyday people in their community, based on shared interests, amazing outcomes are possible! For example, if Derek, who has an interest in model trains, begins attending the Model Train Club meetings in his com-

munity, he'll meet new friends. With a wider circle of friends come increased opportunities for finding a real job, a real place to live with natural supports (instead of a congregate living setting), and more. This is not pie-in-the-sky thinking—it's really happening in pockets here and there across the country. It can happen in your community, too!

Instead of respite care services, family members can turn to friends, neighbors, churches, and other sources. Many parents use respite because they don't feel "nonprofessionals" are willing or able to care for a family member with a disability. But that's just not true! Across the country, teenagers, neighbors, friends, relatives, and others are providing loving care when family members need a night out. If you haven't found someone to do this important job in your life, keep looking! And if you don't feel you have the money to pay for this, barter the services. Someone helps you, you help them in return: take care of *their* kids, pick up their groceries, or do something else! Moreover, if you think someone can't take care of your child as well as a "professional" respite care provider can, remember that *you* know how to take care of your child, and you probably had to train the respite care worker. You can teach someone else, too!

Instead of physical, occupational, speech, or other traditional therapies, we can find more natural ways to meet a person's needs. My friend, Travis, an extraordinarily wise man who happens to have spina bifida and uses a wheelchair, once said, "When people *without* disabilities want to exercise or get in shape, they go to a fitness club, use home exercise equipment, join a park and rec team, take a karate class, or do something like that. But when people *with* disabilities need to get their bodies in shape, they're expected to go to therapy! Why shouldn't we do the same things as others?"

So try some new things instead of therapy! Consider ballet, karate, swimming, other sports, or simply playing games at home and doing other natural activities that exercise muscles, stimulate vocalization, or whatever! We don't have to "therapize" kids lives!

## 2 - Natural Supports and Generic Services

Education is on the chopping block in many states, even though special ed dollars are supposedly “untouchable.” In some cases, funds for paraeducators are being cut. If so, we can find other means of ensuring students with disabilities and their teachers receive additional help, such as PTA/PTO volunteers, “grandparent” programs, college/high school interns, and/or natural peer support in the classroom.

If funds for assistive technology devices are cut, look to the community! Service clubs (Lions, Rotary, etc.) exist to serve their communities, and there are numerous organizations in your city or town. Each could donate funds to your school (or your child!) to purchase assistive technology devices. Simultaneously, why don't parents get the PTA involved? That organization exists to serve the teachers and students in your school, and fundraising is usually the #1 activity! Why shouldn't some of those funds be used to improve education for students with disabilities?

The needs of babies and very young children who receive early childhood services can also be met through natural supports and generic services. Many Park and Rec or other organizations have “Mom and Baby” classes/programs. (Or you can recognize that since you're the expert on your baby, you know what he needs—and can provide that—better than anyone else in the world! One mom who recently came to this conclusion proudly announced her two-year-old is an “Early Intervention Drop-Out.”)

Preschool-aged kids with disabilities can stay home with mom and learn the way their brothers and sisters did (from Mom the Expert). If daycare is needed, an ordinary preschool or child care facility is a more natural environment than a segregated special ed preschool, where kids with disabilities can learn, have fun, and be treated like a Real Kid. If parents don't have the money for this, they can look for scholarships or ask for reduced rates.

Government-funded programs have never been able to meet all the needs of individuals with disabilities, and budget cuts are making a bad situation

even worse. Waiting lists, limited services, people going without what they need—there's no reason to put up with this, banging our heads against the wall and wailing about the unfairness of it all. Should we advocate in our legislative halls? Certainly. But we should not sit back and wait for the government or the human service industry to meet every need.

Lives are at stake! People with disabilities and family members can and should assume responsibility for their own lives and seek whatever help they need from every available source in their communities. We can ask for what we need (as described in the “Ask and You Shall Receive” article) from “non-professionals” who are our friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens.

Professionals can help by brainstorming ways to collaborate with non-disability organizations, encouraging the people they serve to look for natural supports and generic services to meet their needs, and more. Think out of the box!

**A government that is big  
enough to give you all  
you want is big enough  
to take it all away.**

Barry Goldwater

There will always be fluctuations in government funding, but natural supports and generic services can provide a long-term solution to the perpetual crises in human services. Equally important, using natural supports and generic services promotes

inclusion in the community, which can enable each individual with disability to assume the mantle of “citizen” instead of “client.”

What would we do if there *was* no system? Would we really go without or would we work creatively and diligently to find what we need in the community? The suggestions in this article have barely scratched the surface of what's possible. Get out of the rut, put your thinking cap on, believe in yourself and your fellow citizens, and a new world will be opened to you.

Budget cuts are not a signal that the sky is falling. Instead, they represent a glorious opportunity for discovering the abundant supply of natural supports and generic services that have, until now, been invisible to many of us. There's a world beyond the service system: it's the Real World where children and adults with disabilities can live Real Lives, included in their communities.