

Self-Advocacy: *It's Never Too Early!*

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

Mrs. Carroll was pleased by the work of her middle-schoolers. She was especially thrilled by Evan's social studies project, so she shared it with the rest of the class. "I'm so pleased and surprised that a handicapped child could do this well," she gushed. Surrounded by his friends in this inclusive classroom, Evan was aghast! He told his mom about this incident, and she was ready to "raise a little momma hell." But cool heads prevailed, and she decided to let Evan handle it. He wrote the following letter to his teacher:

Dear Mrs. Carroll,

I really enjoy your class. I like doing the social studies projects, although I do have one small concern. Bringing this to your attention is not easy for me, but I think you should know how I feel. While I appreciated the compliment about my work, I was embarrassed and felt singled out when you referred to my disability in front of the class. I will work hard in your class and look forward to learning more.

I have one more request. I would like you to read the brochure [by Kathie Snow] called *People First Language*. I really need my teachers to treat me like anyone else. I

know I'm going to have a great year in your class. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Evan

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In another school, on the fourth day of sixth grade, Robert also faced some dilemmas. His mom could have stepped in, but she encouraged Robert to speak for himself. So he dictated the following letter, his mom typed it, and Robert gave it to his teacher.

Dear Mrs. Teague,

Can you help me? I need help in PE because I can't do it all by myself. Today, we were playing kickball and Miss Ellen and the other lady didn't help me.

All this week, when I walked in the door, Miss Ellen treated me like a baby. When I try and tell her to stop, she won't. I tried again and again and again. Mrs. Teague, can you talk to me about this because it hurts my feelings. Can we talk tomorrow? I am not trying to be mean, but it's a problem. When I go to band, I am real happy with that teacher.

Thank you,
Robert

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One weekend a month, for eight months, Laila Kawar left her home in Coppell, Texas, to attend the Texas Partners in Policymaking leadership development program in Houston. During the training, Laila was exposed to many new ways of thinking from a variety of presenters (including yours truly). She was also learning from others with valuable lessons to share: adults with disabilities in her class.

Some of the lessons focused on the value of encouraging children with disabilities to take more control over their lives. At first, Laila was—to put it mildly—unconvinced. She explained, “My daughter’s only seven and she has cerebral palsy!” But the seeds had been planted, and they soon began to grow. Months passed. Then an Email arrived in my mail box—a letter from her daughter, Rasha, to me and others who had planted the seeds of change.

Dear Partners,

I am Rasha Kawar. I was sad at first when Mom was going to the Partners school because your school is far and it is also at night.

But now I am happy because you are helping my Mom get better at listening to me and asking what I want before she does it for me. I am going to the IEP meeting with my mom. And I told Rosemary, the aide at school, to leave me alone sometimes. She is nice and cool, but I want to be only with

my friends like everybody else. I told my therapist I don’t want to work on crawling, but walking, and it’s *my* body. My mom told them to listen to *me*. I think [Partners] is a good school for moms and dads because my mom listens to me more now. Thank you and I hope your school will come to Coppell so mom can sleep at home.

Love,

Rasha Kawar

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On another day, in another place, David, a young teen with a disability, spoke up for himself and shared one of his many dreams. Weeks later one of his dreams came true when seventh-grader David Buckner lined up with 25 other boys and girls (who don’t have disabilities) for the middle school cross country race. Through bone-chilling rain and ankle-deep mud, David and the other athletes ran and ran. His parents’ belief in him, his principal’s perseverance, his friends who trained with him, and David’s dream and determination paid off. At the finish line, David proudly accepted his 8th place bronze medallion. This race helped others learn that abilities, interests, and strengths—not disability—define the person. David is a runner. David is a winner.

And so are Evan, Robert, Rasha, and all the other children are who learning to speak for themselves. It’s never too early, and it’s never too late for children with disabilities to find their own voices and take charge of their own lives!