

GOALS: Meaningful and Relevant

or

GARBAGE?

Revolutionary Common Sense

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We're fanatics about goals! In Disability World, a person who receives government-funded services or benefits is also on the receiving end of goals for his life (whether he wants them or not). The laws governing services mandate the writing of goals—goals about physical abilities, behavior, academics, self-care, employment, and just about everything under the sun! Goals are written for little tiny babies (and their families), young children, school-aged children, and adults of all ages.

The “I”—in IFSPs (Individualized Family Service Plans), IEPs (Individualized Education Programs), IHPs (Individualized Habilitation Programs), and other Plans and Programs—means the goals are to be *individualized* (not based on the diagnosis). And the individual (and/or the parents) whose life is being Planned or Programmed is supposed to be involved in the PP process (that's what I like to call it).

In the Real World, having goals is a good thing. If the goal is a college education, a teenager's high school courses will get him there. If the goal is a Hawaiian vacation, the family sets aside money for the trip. In the Real World, people create personal goals that are meaningful and relevant to them. The same is not always true (hardly ever, it seems) in Disability World. There, goals are often *meaningless and irrelevant* to the individual who is supposed to achieve them. They're Garbage Goals, written by—and only important to—others.

Such goals may represent attempts to “normalize” a person with a disability: they reflect functional skills, behavior, or some other characteristic that's representative of one “norm” or another. They may reflect the personal standards of those who write the

goals: “I do things this way, therefore, so must everyone else.” Or they may have been regurgitated by a computer—yes, in today's advanced world of computer software, an educator can type in a child's diagnosis, and the computer will spit out goals based on the medical diagnosis! (*That's individualized?*)

But wait, there's more! I once presented to a group of special ed preschool teachers, who reported that *they* write the goals for all the children with dis-

abilities in their classrooms, *without ever meeting the child and without ever talking with the parents!* This should not have been shocking—I'm aware that many educators (illegally) write an IEP without the input of the student or the parents. What *was* shocking was that these educators so freely admitted it! Did they *know* parents were supposed to be involved in writing their children's IEPs? Yes—I asked! So why didn't they ensure parents were involved? Because (they said) parents (1) didn't know how to write goals, (2) didn't come to the meetings, and/or (3) parents didn't care. (I challenged them on all points, but that's another story.)

I asked *how* they could write individualized goals without knowing the child and parents, and this was their second shocking reply: they reviewed the assessments done on a particular child (“Ryan,” a three-year-old, for example), and compared those to the developmental scale for a “typical three-year-old.” They then wrote goals that were intended to turn Ryan into a “typical child.” *It didn't matter to them whether or not these goals represented skills or milestones that were meaningful or relevant to Ryan or his parents!*

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Now let's consider what generally happens when a child or adult doesn't meet the goals that have been written for her? We may believe she has failed, is incompetent, and/or has chosen to be "non-compliant," or we may find some other justification that is used to *blame the person* for this failure. We should, however, closely examine the goals *we helped write*. We should also honestly assess if we played a role in this situation, for we frequently set people up to fail when the goals are not meaningful and relevant. Please memorize those words: MEANINGFUL AND RELEVANT, post them for everyone to see during a PP meeting, and let them guide your every action.

When I present at conferences, many parents show me their children's IEP documents. With few exceptions, the goals are deplorable: "Melissa will read at a sixth-grade level." To whom is this meaningful and relevant? To Melissa, her parents, her teachers, or administrators who are concerned about statewide tests? If the goal is not meaningful and relevant to Melissa, it will not be achieved! A more meaningful and relevant goal might be, "Melissa will read and write a report on a *Harry Potter* book."

Some goals are so vague they're almost laughable, except there's nothing funny about the power that goals may have over a person's daily life at school or work: "Matthew will improve his behavior." What does this mean? Improve how? To what degree? And to whose standard? What if Mr. Smith "approves" of Matthew's behavior, but Mrs. Jones doesn't?

"Joseph will [do whatever] 3 out of 4 times, with 90 percent accuracy," is another questionable goal. I don't know how writing goals in this style came about, but it's a favorite of some educators and some physical and occupational therapists. Is this a meaningful and relevant goal to Joseph? Does this reflect real life in any way, shape, or form? And if the goal involves a physical skill, how does one measure 90 percent accuracy? (A better method for writing effective goals is described in the "Activity-Based Goals" article.)

Service providers have shared some of the goals written for the adults they work with in group homes such as, "Marianne will wash, dry, and put away the dishes within twenty minutes of eating." This goal isn't really about achieving a goal or learning a new

Real Lives

Amanda Pechan is the proud mother of two young children. Seven-month-old Jadyn has been given several different labels. Amanda Emailed, telling me how much she enjoyed the Disability is Natural website, and she shared the following: "At the early intervention meeting, they asked what my goals were for Jadyn by the time she was a year old. I sat there for a second, and the only thing I could think of was for Jadyn to be happy. And she *is* a happy baby! They seemed disappointed with this answer. I thought to myself, 'Do other parents—whose children are not labeled—identify physical and cognitive goals for their children to reach by a certain age? No! So why should Jadyn be treated any differently than other babies?'"

skill; *it's about compliance and doing something the way someone else thinks it should be done!* I once asked a group of sixty adult service providers if, in their own lives, they routinely did the things that they wrote as goals for others. They sheepishly wagged their heads and mumbled, "No." How can we, in good conscience, impose standards on others that we don't meet ourselves?

The most important step in writing meaningful and relevant goals is listening to the person. We can ask questions like, "What's really important to you," "How do you want to do it," and "How can we best help you learn?"

A third-grader can be told about all the great things he'll be exposed to in the third-grade curriculum. If he's not at "grade-level," we can—with his input—write meaningful and relevant goals to help increase his understanding of a subject (geography, for example). If "William" likes puzzles, this might be an appropriate goal: "Using a geography puzzle, William will identify the names and locations of the 50 United States." And when he's shown us *once* that he knows, he's met the goal! We should not try to make William prove over and over again that he's achieved this skill! Have we ever considered that if we insist that William demonstrate this ability again and again, there's a good chance he'll ignore the request: *he*

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knows he can do it, and he's sick of our demands that he perform like a trained seal. But do we recognize this behavior as William's efforts to communicate his disgust? No, we label him as "defiant," "uncooperative," "manipulative," or something worse!

A teenager's dreams of life after high school—college, vocational/technical school, or a real job—should drive his goals. Meaningful and relevant goals can help dreams come true.

The dreams of many adults include having a real job, going to college, moving from the group home to their own place, and/or all of the above. Unfortunately, some people are never deemed "competent" to have a real job or "able" to live in their own place because they don't meet the "standards of readiness," in the form of goals, imposed by others.

What does it *really* take for a person to live on her own? Think about when *you* left your parents' home to strike out on your own. Did you know how to do everything your parents routinely did? Like cooking, paying bills, balancing the checkbook, and...the list is endless. No, you probably didn't. I remember calling my mother long-distance, way back when, asking what to do with the five-pound roast I wanted to cook! We learn by doing, by our mistakes, by asking others, and in many other ways. Why is a different standard imposed on people with disabilities?

If an adult service provider came into my home and measured whether I met some of the goals routinely assigned to people with disabilities, I probably wouldn't meet those standards—and the provider probably wouldn't either.

So in thinking about adults in today's world, let's be realistic! "Cooking" can involve nothing more than taking something out of the freezer and sticking it in the microwave (isn't this what most of us do today?). If a person can't balance a checkbook, he can get help from the friendly banker (or a friend or neighbor), or a simple spread sheet on the computer can do the work for him. Let's be honest: most people *without* disabilities have varying levels of competency

in the daily routines of adult life. We get help from others, do the best we can, and live imperfect, good lives! Why can't the same be true for people with disabilities?

Will the goals for an adult lead to the fulfillment of the person's hopes and dreams, or do they only represent functional activities or compliance to rules? Do the goals for a school-aged child support friendships, inclusion, and academic success, or do they result in isolation and segregation? Do the goals for a young child and her family focus on a family's real needs for togetherness and being a happy family, or do they put pressure on the child and/or family to achieve some standard of "normalcy"?

Are goals meaningful and relevant to the person? Are they written in words that make sense to the person? (No more gobbledy-gook!) Are the goals achievable and realistic, *from the individual's (or family's) point of view*?

Ultimately, it comes down to this: if we're focused on the person's disability and his so-called deficits and problems, we'll write goals that are important to *us* and/or goals to "normalize" the person to an "able-bodied" standard. Not only will these goals probably be meaningless and irrelevant to the individual, but they may also be demeaning and may set the person up for failure. If, however, we focus on the Real Person, a person who has his or her own set of hopes and dreams and abilities and strengths, who deserves the opportunity to lead a real and authentic life, we'll focus on goals that have meaning and relevance to that individual. And we won't write any more Garbage Goals.

In the final analysis, be guided by this: would you want others to write a Plan or Program for *your* life? The answer is probably a resounding, "No!" Try to imagine what it must feel like to be the focus of a PP meeting—try to climb inside another's heart and soul—and then be careful about goals, please be ever so careful.

**The strongest principle
of growth lies in human choice.**

George Eliot