

# Beware the RETARDING Environment

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

In 1984, a report entitled, “Surviving in the System: Mental Retardation and the Retarding Environment,” detailed how placing individuals with cognitive disabilities in institutions or congregate settings puts them in “retarding environments.” Who were the architects of this impressive and profound revelation? A group of people who had been assigned the stigma-laden “mental retardation” label: members of the People First chapter of California.

Today, “retarding environments” can be found at home, in school, and in other ordinary settings. But how can *ordinary* environments be “retarding”? Because many individuals with disabilities do not have the tools, accommodations, and/or supports they need, which causes their social, emotional, and intellectual growth to be slowed down, or retarded.

Sara, a three-year-old with an orthopedic disability, is not crawling or walking. She’s positioned properly in a manual wheelchair, but she must always be pushed by someone. As a result, Sara isn’t able to experience the vast amount of learning that occurs when three-year-olds explore their world: going where and when she wants in her own home, learning she can “run away” from mom and return, achieving a new level of independence, and more. Her intellectual and social development are significantly impacted, and Sara is learning

dependence in retarding environments at home, in preschool, and in other settings.

Her parents and therapists are focused on getting Sara to walk. That, they believe, is the “problem” that needs to be remedied. While focusing on one ability (walking), other—and more important—aspects of Sara’s development are in jeopardy.

But what if Sara had independent mobility (a power wheelchair) so she could explore and learn, acquire ordinary social skills, and become more self-directed? Which is more important: walking or mastering her world in whatever way works best for her?

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Brian, a nine-year-old with a cognitive disability, is said to “function at the level of a six-year-old.” Because he can’t yet read, educators (and his parents) don’t feel he could be successful in a regular class, so Brian has spent three years

in a segregated special ed room, where teachers have focused on teaching him to read.

This placement has produced extremely negative outcomes for Brian. Being in the “retard room” (the name for this room used by many students without disabilities) makes him feel bad about himself. His struggle against these feelings is leading adults to presume he has “behavior problems.” Also, because he’s in the special ed room,

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he's not exposed to the age-appropriate general ed curriculum, which causes him to fall further and further behind. Sadly, he'll probably spend the remainder of his school career in special segregated classes, and he'll probably leave the public school system uneducated and unprepared for work or post-secondary education, after spending twelve or more years in retarding special ed environments.

While educators and Brian's parents focused on one skill (reading), Brian lost countless opportunities to learn from the ordinary activities and experiences in general ed classes. There are many ways to learn: through hands-on activities, computer programs and videos/DVDs, listening, drawing, and more. The inability to read need not be a barrier to learning and academic success! Which is more important: reading or learning in any way you can?

Mary Ann has spent years in a sheltered workshop being "prepared" for a real job. She hates assembling widgets all day, but staff thinks she's incapable of anything more. Like Brian, Mary Ann rebels against the insults to her dignity brought on by this menial, boring work and the Simon Lagree-like treatment of her "bosses. Using the only power she has left, she resists. According to staff, this non-compliant behavior "proves" Mary Ann is not ready for a real job.

Retarding environments are not limited to segregated or congregate settings. They can exist anywhere individuals with disabilities are prevented from living ordinary, natural lives and having power over the small, but important details of their daily lives and their long-term hopes and dreams.

How can we prevent retarding environments? First, by understanding that people with disabilities need the same opportunities and experiences for growth and development as people without disabilities. To meet that goal, children and adults with disabilities must be in age-appropriate, ordinary, inclusive settings.

Next, people with disabilities must have the tools, accommodations, and supports they need to be successful in these ordinary, inclusive environments. Few people *without* disabilities would be successful if they didn't have appropriate tools and accommodations (computers, cell phones, support from peers, and so forth), so why is it OK for people *with* disabilities to go without what they need?

And, finally, we must look at people with disabilities and *PRESUME COMPETENCE*. Our attitudes, language, and perceptions, coupled with special programs, services, and interventions that attempt to fix a person's "problems," reflect the belief that people with disabilities are incompetent and unable. But they're not! Again, when they have the supports, accommodations, and assistive technology they need, and when they're in ordinary, inclusive, age-appropriate environments, they can achieve the same success most of us take for granted.

We don't need to change people with disabilities. We need to change the environment—along with our attitudes, perceptions, and language.

When we recognize the dangers of retarding environments, and when we operate from the *PRESUME COMPETENCE* paradigm, we'll ensure the Saras, Brians, and Mary Anns of this world can live the lives of their dreams.

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