

# Great Expectations

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

Have you heard this tale about a school teacher? On the last day of school, a weary, worn-out teacher entered the principal's office for one last visit before the summer vacation. "Please," the teacher begged, "give me better students next year—I can't handle another year like this past one!" Three months passed, and on the first day of the new school year, the teacher eye-balled her class roster with growing excitement. She read, "Susan Jones-135, Lolo Brown-140, Maria Lopez-144..." and so on. "Geniuses" she thought, "I have a class of geniuses!" That school year was wonderful—for the teacher *and* her students!

On the last day of school, the teacher came across the class roster in the bottom of a drawer. It was wrinkled and torn in a few places, but she gazed at it fondly. At the end of the day, she stopped by the principal's office. "Thank you for the *best year ever*," she gushed, waving the class roster like a flag. "This made all the difference—my class of geniuses!" Puzzled, the principal took a quick look at the paper and said, "I don't know what you're talking about—these numbers were their locker assignments!"

Learning that she had mistakenly assumed the numbers were her students' IQ scores didn't change a thing: the teacher *still* had the best year ever! At the beginning of that school year, she believed the best about her students, had high expectations for them, and was excited! In turn, her students lived up to—and even exceeded—her expectations. None actually had a "genius IQ," but in *her mind* they did, *and that's what mattered!* Her *attitude*—not the students' actual academic abilities—made the difference! The teacher learned a great lesson. Can we learn from this, too?

The "Low Expectation Syndrome" (LES) attached to people with disabilities—whether they're toddlers or middle-agers—can be a greater barrier to success than the person's actual disability

diagnosis. The double-whammy many parents receive (from physicians, educators, service providers, etc.) essentially goes something like this: "Your child has (fill-in-the-blank), so don't expect much." While the medical diagnosis of autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, or other condition may be an accurate fact, the LES verdict is only someone's *opinion*—*about as valid as a fortune-teller's vision in a crystal ball!*

Nevertheless, the LES descriptor usually sticks to the person like a powerful glue: parents may believe it, along with educators, service providers, therapists, and others throughout the person's life. The outcome? Children and adults with disabilities are often denied the ordinary experiences that could lead to their success. When the low-expectations-mentality prevails, the self-fulfilling prophecy is fulfilled: people with disabilities—like those *without* disabilities—will most likely live up (or down) to our expectations.

Before going further, let's tackle one of the barriers to expecting more: the "false hopes" issue. On a regular basis, parents are told not to get their hopes up, so they won't be disappointed later. In turn, parents may pooh-pooh their children's hopes and dreams in order to protect *them* from disappointment. What we're really talking about is the *fear* of disappointment. First, we can't *know* we'll experience disappointment, so why do we waste even one moment worrying

***The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.***

**President Franklin D. Roosevelt**

about something that may not happen? Second, on a daily basis, we experience *actual* disappointment: the bathroom scale seems stuck, a pay raise doesn't come through, a loved one dies, and much, much more. Have any of these actual disappointments made our lives unlivable? No, we survive, and in many cases, disappointment leads to enlightenment, wisdom, and maturity, and can even spur us on to greater things! Real disappointment is often a blessing in disguise.

## 2 - Great Expectations

What is life without hope? A living death. And isn't all hope essentially "false," since no one can predict the future? Calling something "false hope" simply represents a difference in opinion and perspective. A pessimist sees false hope; an optimist sees possibilities.

In addition, some will say, "But this person will never [fill-in-the-blank]," and *they're right!* Joe probably won't ever get a job and Mary Ann may never go to college, not because they have disabilities, *but because we don't believe it can happen!*

Conversely, when we believe it can happen, we start doing the things to make it happen—and the hope becomes reality! We generally operate from the perspective of, "I'll believe it when I see it." But we need to reverse this to: "I'll see it when I believe it." The belief has to come first, followed by action.

So what if we made the choice (*and it is a choice*) to have great expectations for children and adults with disabilities? What if we chose to be *excited and passionate about possibilities*?

We must first go beyond expectations related to the disability. Traditionally, we've looked at what a person with a disability cannot do, and then write goals to address the "problem." This, we think, is the right approach: try to make a child walk, talk, behave, write her name, tie her shoes, or whatever! For adults, focus on meal preparation, bed-making, etc. We don't seem to be able to think bigger until these goals have been achieved! But some people may never walk, tie their shoes, or achieve other functional skills. How dare we hold them hostage to the "able-bodied standard," limit their opportunities, and prevent them from living the lives of their dreams?

When my son, Benjamin, was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at the age of four months, the doctor delivered his low-expectation: "Take him home and do the best you can..." We rejected that nonsense, electing to have the same expectations for our son

as for our daughter: that he be successful in school, have friends, go to college and/or enter the workforce. Luckily, we had learned (from adults with disabilities) that walking, holding a pencil, and other "normal" skills were *not* prerequisites to Benjamin being successful! So we stayed true to our greater expectations instead of the puny functional skills favored by many professionals! We also provided Benjamin with a power wheelchair, laptop computer, voice recognition software, and other tools, accommodations, and supports he needed. Today, he's a successful college student. High expectations paid off, and *our belief in Benjamin enabled him to believe in himself!*

The same is true for Dylan, an 18-year-old with Down syndrome. He just started reading last year, but he's always been included in general ed classrooms, where he's learned "his way." He's leaving high school with the other seniors, will have a summer job (paid), and will attend college in the fall (auditing many classes). Again, the high expectations of his parents paid off. There's never been any question that Dylan would go to college, following in the footsteps of his older brother and sister.

What's more important? Writing your name with a pencil or learning how to use a computer so you can be successful at school and on the job? Spending your childhood in therapy to learn to walk (or talk) or using a power wheelchair (or communication device) so you can be the age you are, learn and grow, and get on with your life? Learning to follow a recipe book or figuring out how to throw something together in the kitchen the way most of us do? Put your thinking cap on and consider other scenarios—there's a ton of traditional low expectations and paltry goals that need to be examined and permanently discarded!

We can reject the Low Expectation Syndrome, and choose to be like the teacher and "believe the best." It's time to get excited and passionate—it's time for great expectations!

***Like you, I had no conscious faith, but if I acted, then the faith would surely follow. After that, I would believe because I had acted. Perhaps that is how faith is born, I thought: by action and not by contemplation. It was worth a try. Anything was better than stasis.***

**John leCarre**