

# “You Are What You Learn”

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

Check out this wisdom from the blog of Scott Adams, the creator of “Dilbert” ([www.dilbert.com](http://www.dilbert.com)):

You are what you learn. If all you know is how to be a gang member, that’s what you’ll be, at least until you learn something else. If you go to law school, you’ll see the world as a competition. If you study engineering, you’ll start to see the world as a complicated machine that needs tweaking. A person changes at a fundamental level as he or she merges with a particular field of knowledge. If you don’t like who you are, you have the option of learning until you become someone else. There’s almost nothing you can’t learn your way out of. Life is like a jail with an unlocked, heavy door. You’re free the minute you realize the door will open if you simply lean into it.

Wow! His words leave me breathless; the message is so commonsense and so very profound, and—it seems to me—so doable!

Many of us have reinvented ourselves in employment: some by choice and some out of necessity, as we learn new skills and embark on a new career. Some people take something powerful in their lives—from a hobby to a life-threatening situation and everything in between—and turn it into a wage-earning career.

Now let’s think about children and adults with disabilities and the words of Scott Adams: “You are what you learn.” What does one learn from interventions, therapies, special/segregated programs, and the usual “treatment” doled out to people with disabilities? Conversely, what does one learn from ordinary, inclusive, age-appropriate activities, classrooms, workplaces, community activities, etc.?

At the age of four months, my son, Benjamin, who has cerebral palsy, began receiving intensive physical and occupational therapies, and he was surrounded by other children with disabilities at the clinic. When he turned three, I enrolled him in a “regular” neighborhood preschool, where he was surrounded by children who did not have disabilities, instead of the special ed preschool for children with

disabilities. Imagine my shock when four-year-old Benj asked me if his same-aged cousin, Colin, still used his walker. I didn’t know what he was talking about and had to ask, “What do you mean,” a number of times before I understood.

Because of his years in therapy, Benjamin thought *all* children were taken to therapists and were given a walker, and that’s how they learned how to walk. He thought his classmates at the neighborhood preschool—along with his cousin—had “finished” with therapy and no longer needed their walkers. I was shocked to my core. This experience caused me to wonder what else my son was learning from the “abnormal” experiences that are inherent in “Disability World.”

There’s an enormous focus on the importance of “early learning.” But what if that early learning is *not* what we want children to learn? What happens when children or adults of any age are learning not what they’re “taught,” but what they’re learning experientially?

“Natalie,” a middle-school special ed teacher contacted me one spring. She was going to work hard to ensure her students with

disabilities were included in general ed classrooms during the coming school year. She planned on using my book (*Disability is Natural*) as a guide, and we agreed to stay in touch. Months later she reported that things weren’t going well: her students *were* in general ed classes, but the classroom teachers wanted them sent back to the special ed room. They said the students with disabilities didn’t know to use their indoor voices; to hold up their hands and wait to be called on; to walk through the hallways quietly, in single file; and more—*things students without disabilities routinely learn in kindergarten!*

In Natalie’s opinion (and I agree, based on hearing similar stories from many others), her students had not learned those things because they had been in self-contained classrooms in elementary school—a very

**One does what one is;  
one becomes what one does.**

*Robert vonMusil*

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different environment than general ed classrooms. Close to tears, she said, “I *know* my students can learn those things, but if the teachers don’t give them a chance *now*, when *will* they be given the chance?”

Many adults with developmental disabilities had similar experiences as children. Being segregated in self-contained classrooms, they didn’t learn the routine things students without disabilities learn in school. So when they’re finished with public school, they’re judged “not ready” for a normal adult life; they’ve been prepared only for continued segregation in residential facilities, sheltered workshops, etc., fulfilling the paradigm, “You are what you learn.”

You are also what you *do not* learn. Thus, many children with disabilities (who become adults) have learned helplessness and dependence (via segregation). They have *not* learned how to get along in the real world (via inclusion), nor reading, writing, and arithmetic!

Let’s look forward, and then go backward. We’ll start with the big picture, that the outcomes for children with disabilities should be the same as for children without disabilities: that their family upbringing and public school education prepares them (1) to enter the workforce, post-secondary education, and/or both; and (2) to be responsible and active members of their communities.

But how can you learn what you need to learn to achieve these outcomes if you’re never given opportunities to do so? And what do children with disabilities learn from the “traditional” ways they’re treated?

If, as a young child, you’re spending most of your life in therapy sessions (PT, OT, Speech, etc.), you’re learning that you’re “not okay” the way you are, that the way you move your body parts is not “right.” At some point, you might move your body in ways other people say is “right” (but you might have done that anyway, therapy or not), *and* you’ve also learned that you’re not “good enough.” (There *are* ways to provide assistance and help people learn without making them feel “less than.”)

What do young children with disabilities learn in a self-contained special ed preschool? That not talking or not walking or whatever is the norm?

You cannot learn to “be” a 4th-grader if you’ve been in a self-contained K-5 classroom since kindergarten. You cannot learn to “be” a high school senior if you’ve been in life-skills classes since middle school. You cannot “be” a self-directed, responsible adult if you’ve never been allowed to be self-directed and responsible.

If you’re addicted to drugs or alcohol, you cannot “learn to be sober” if you continue to hang out with people who use drugs and alcohol. You can learn to be sober only in a sober environment with sober people. How do you learn to not be a gang member unless and until you get out of the gang?

Many people realize that skills learned in isolation can seldom be transferred. For example, we can try to teach a child with a disability “whatever” in a self-contained classroom, but it’s unlikely that he can generalize that skill to a regular classroom—it’s a totally different environment.

So let’s ensure children and adults with disabilities have opportunities to learn to “be” who they’re meant to be: a successful toddler or third-grader or college student or employee; a helpful big brother; a caring volunteer; a responsible citizen; or...[make the list longer]. Let’s also ensure people with disabilities are not in settings where they learn to be helpless and dependent, or learn inappropriate behaviors from others, or learn that they’re not okay, etc.

If children or adults with disabilities have learned things they need to *unlearn*, remember Adams’ words: “...you have the option of learning until you become someone else. There’s almost nothing you can’t learn your way out of. Life is like a jail with an unlocked, heavy door. You’re free the minute you realize the door will open if you simply lean into it.” As parents, teachers, service providers, etc., let’s learn *our* way into better attitudes and actions so people with disabilities can lean into that door and be free.

**The ability to learn is older  
and more widespread than  
is the ability to teach.**

*Margaret Mead*