What We Owe Children

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

Before the birth of my now 21-year-old son, Benjamin, and the subsequent news that he had cerebral palsy, I knew nothing about people with disabilities—like most parents. Early on, I just knew that we had the same dreams for Benjamin that we had for our daughter, Emily: that both would grow up and be nice people, do well in school and make friends, go to college and get a good job, get married, make us grandparents, and take care of my husband and me when we got old!

We were, however, cautioned by many experts to be "realistic:" don't expect too much, don't have big dreams, lower your expectations. But we didn't listen to that nonsense. Common sense tells us that children will live up or down to our expectations, so we held tight to our dreams. If *we* didn't have big dreams for Benjamin, who would? We owed him that, just as we owed it to our daughter.

By the time Benjamin was three, I had learned more about disability issues: first, through my participation in the extraordinary leadership development program, Partners in Policymaking (www.partnersinpolicymaking.com), and then from new friends who happened to have developmental disabilities. I learned about the dismal unemployment rate of people with disabilities, and many adults with developmental disabilities shared their childhood experiences with me. It didn't take a high-falutin' research project to understand that those who were segregated and received a sub-standard education as children faced great difficulties in the employment arena when they became adults; while those who received a "regular" academic education were much more likely to enjoy employment success as adults.

So we knew it was critically important for Benjamin to receive a good academic education in general ed classrooms, not a special ed room, just like his sister—we owed both our children that. And that's what Benjamin received, beginning in kindergarten way back in 1992, at the wonderfully inclusive neighborhood elementary school. Several years before, Principal Mike made the decision that his school would be inclusive, after researching what happened to the vast majority of children with disabilities when they left school. He noted that many had spent 18 or 19 years in special education classrooms (from ages 3-22), but they were still considered unemployable as adults, ending up in day programs or sub-minimum wage jobs! Mike knew better outcomes were possible if *all children* were educated in general education classrooms. Benjamin, along with every other child with a disability, received a high quality, inclusive education from kindergarten through fifth grade. And, yes, he needed and received a variety of assistive technology devices, supports, accommodations, and curriculum modifications.

Later, Benjamin and his sister were homeschooled, where the academics continued. The decision to homeschool was not a disability/special education issue, it was much simpler: my daughter didn't like the middle school environment, and neither did I. So, Benjamin followed in his sister's homeschooling footsteps when it came time for middle school.

As my own education in disability issues progressed, I realized that even with a good education, and hopefully, post-secondary education, Benjamin would most likely have a more difficult time than his sister when it came time to find a job. Despite all the social and legal progress in our society, discrimination in many forms still exists. So when Benjamin was old enough to understand, I talked to him about this issue. When any person applies for a job, he is competing with other applicants. Thus, a person with a disability (especially when the condition is visible) has to up the ante, by "presenting" himself better, having a better education, a better resume, or some other "oomph" factor that can get him over the hump of discrimination, low expectations, or other subjective opinions of a potential employer. Forewarned is forearmed, right?

Today, Benjamin is working hard and doing well in community college; he's in Phi Theta Kappa (the national academic honor society for two-year colleges); and is maintaining a portfolio of accomplishments for his future resume. He has high expectations for himself.

So let's be *really* realistic about what we, as responsible adults—parents, teachers, therapists, and others—owe children with disabilities:

- We owe them an unwavering commitment to have high expectations for them and to support their dreams, so they can dream big dreams for themselves.
- We owe them more than an "appropriate" education; they need an education that's as good as, or better than, the education of students without disabilities, because they have a harder row to hoe, now and in the future.
- We owe them an age-appropriate, inclusive education, as well as participation in inclusive community activities, so they can benefit from the ordinary and precious childhood opportunities to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic; to know how to get along in the real world; to make friends; and to acquire many other skills that can only be learned in real-world, inclusive environments. If the current public school can't fill this requirement, parents should explore other public schools, private schools, or homeschooling.
- We owe them whatever assistive technology devices, supports, and modifications they need to enable them to be successful now, and in the future, at home, school, and other inclusive environments.
- We owe them every opportunity to experience all the ups and downs and privileges and responsibilities of a "normal" life: to try and fail and learn from mistakes, to experience the dignity of risk, to receive an allowance and blow it on junk, to do chores at home, and other ordinary childhood experiences.
- Finally, we owe them our solemn promise that we will protect them from those who would cause harm through low expectations, sub-standard education, segregated environments, and/or other malignant influences.

Once you have discovered what is happening, you can't pretend not to know, and you can't abdicate responsibility.

P. D. James

For our efforts to succeed, parents and other family members, teachers and administrators, and therapists and others in a child's life, must work cooperatively. No one can do it alone, and our best efforts can easily be sabotaged by the actions of one. I recently saw "Daniel" at our local supermarket. He was two years ahead of Benjamin in school, so he's about 24 now. Daniel has autism, and like Benjamin, he was always included and received a good education. His teachers had high expectations, but his parents did not. Daniel got his "sacker's job" at the store while still in high school, but there's been no progression since. When I saw him recently, he asked about Benjamin, and I said Benj was attending our local community college. With pride, Daniel said his younger brother was going there, too. Then I asked, "What about you, Daniel—are you going to college, too?" He looked down at his feet, swung his arms a bit, and then finally said, "Nah—I guess my place is here." The pain in his face and his voice was palpable. His parents had high expectations for his brother, but not for him.

Knowing what we know, how can we continue having low expectations for children with disabilities? How can we look into their hopeful, trusting eyes and consign them to a sub-standard, segregated childhood, which leads to hopelessness when they're adults? How can we devalue their potential by limiting their opportunities to learn and grow? These are not rhetorical questions. How can we justify these actions—to ourselves and to children?

Adults have responsibilities for *all* children, and many children with disabilities may need "more" than children without disabilities. How then, can we continue giving them "less"? We owe them whatever they need to succeed.
