

A SMALL FOOTPRINT

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

During the last few years, we've become familiar with the concept of having an ecologically "small footprint"—each of us living in such a way that we generate the least negative impact on our beautiful planet. Using less electricity, gasoline, and other fuels and/or drinking tap water instead of bottled water represent some examples of the changes that can make a difference. Simultaneously, many are also working to reverse the existing damage to our planet. What if we applied the same principles to the lives of people with disabilities?

Many children and adults with developmental disabilities have an army of people in their lives (parents, educators, therapists, service providers, and others) who may generate many large footprints in their lives. We can have the best of intentions in providing massive doses of help, but our footprints can unintentionally cause harm when children and adults with disabilities experience learned helplessness and dependence, social isolation and/or physical segregation, and/or other negative consequences. In some cases, the army of footprints in a person's life may even trample and obscure the person's identity and humanity.

So . . . what if we became more intentional about generating the smallest footprint on the life of a child or adult with a disability? And what if we worked hard to reverse any harm that's already been done?

What if we allowed six-year-old Joe and 40-year-old Mary to make more of their own decisions (and allow them "permission to fail" so they can learn from their mistakes as others

do)? What if we provided Joe and Mary with the assistive technology devices, supports, and/or accommodations so they won't need so many "human interventions" in the form of therapies, "daily living skills," meeting goals, etc.? What if we focused on ensuring Joe and Mary live more self-directed lives, included in ordinary environments, instead of "protecting" them in special, artificial, and/or segregated environments? What if we realized that the best help we could provide is to encourage and support Joe and Mary in living the lives they want, instead of what we want? What if we realized that the most valuable influences in the lives of Joe and Mary are the ones they invite into their lives, from family, friends, neighbors, classmates, co-workers, etc., which are generated by love, shared interests, and other ordinary (but precious) affiliations?

Ultimately, what if we thought about ourselves, and wondered how it would feel to have so many people leaving big footprints in *our lives*? Would that action propel us in a new direction? We can do this, and if we ask, "What will it take," we'll generate the ideas and strategies to make it happen.

Maintaining a small ecological footprint demonstrates love and respect for Mother Earth. Leaving a small "intervention/help" footprint in the life of a person with a disability—allowing the person to blossom and experience the freedom, self-direction, and dignity most of us take for granted—represents great love and respect for our brothers and sisters who happen to have disabilities.