

MODELING: FOR GOOD OR FOR ILL

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The teenager sees other teens taking drugs and wants to do the same. A ten-year-old sees his father gently removing the barbed hook from the mouth of the trout so it can be released, and the boy learns to do the same. Modeling—the act of imitation—happens all the time. We may model the looks, actions, language, and/or behaviors of others and the outcomes may be positive or negative.

While working in my yard, I wanted to prevent as many weeds as possible. To that end, I decided to tackle the “garden” of weeds growing in the alley behind our home. I didn’t want them creeping through the fence or having the wind blow their seeds into our yard. But there was little I could do about the dense weeds growing in the alley areas of our neighbors. So imagine my surprise later that day when the neighbor behind and the neighbor on one side cleared their alley weeds! Did my actions spur them on or would they have done it anyway? I’m not sure.

While going about our daily tasks, at home, on the job, and in other environments, do we consider what impact our actions might have within the disability arena? Let’s consider some scenarios.

A five-year-old with a disability is “held back” in kindergarten because someone determines she’s “not ready”—emotionally, socially, or academically—for first grade. So, it’s believed, a second year in kindergarten will do the trick and help her become more “mature.” Hmmmmm. How will being with children who are a year *younger* help her mature? Instead of becoming more like a six-year-old who should be in first grade, she’ll stay more like a kindergartner and will model the behaviors of her peers.

A child with autism flaps his arms and sometimes bites the back of his hand. He’s “placed” in an “autism classroom” where his “needs will be met” (i.e., make him stop doing these “inappropriate behaviors”). But in this classroom, he’s surrounded by other children with autism who can’t sit still, who persevere, and

who flap their arms and bite the back of their hands. So he’ll most likely learn that what he’s doing is the “norm,” *and* he’ll learn new “behaviors” from his classmates! Think of other examples.

In his article, [“It’s Not What We Teach, It’s What They Learn”](#) Alfie Kohn writes: “...what we do doesn’t matter nearly as much as how kids experience what we do.” And perhaps the same is true for adults.

So it seems important for us to consider what children and/or adults with disabilities are *experiencing* as a result of *our actions*. Our deliberations need to

be wide and deep, and should include “minor” issues to “major” situations, *considered from the perspective of the child/adult with a disability*. For example, I might say or do something that seems like a “minor” issue to me, but my son, Benjamin, may experience it as a “major” issue.

So back to modeling. Consider students with disabilities in general ed classrooms. If the classroom teacher treats the student with a disability as an equal member of her classroom, so will the other students in the class (and the student with a disability will make friends and enjoy other positive benefits). On the other hand, if the teacher demonstrates pity, apathy, aversion, etc. (covertly or overtly) toward the student with a disability, the students in her classroom will model that behavior.

In schools where students with disabilities are in self-contained classrooms and are not part of the mainstream of the school in the cafeteria, playground, and/or in extra-curricular activities, the main student body *experiences* the message generated by the actions of adults in the school (self-contained classrooms): those “sped” kids don’t belong, they’re not like us, etc. That experience can shape the minds of these students *for the rest of their lives* and no doubt contributes to the continuation of pervasively negative attitudes about people with disabilities in our society, in the employment arena, community activities, religious entities, education, and more. Children

People were not what they said. They were not what they thought. They were not what they promised. People were what they did. When the final tally was done, nothing else mattered.

James Lee Burke

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without disabilities who have not grown up alongside children with disabilities will, as adults, simply model what they experienced as children (unless there's an intervening occurrence, like becoming the parent of a child with a disability). This example represents the macro. What about the micro?

How many times have we heard or seen ourselves in one of our children—our words, tone of voice, body language, or something else? We're most likely proud of—or even giddy—about the “good” mimicry that we see or hear; we may be horrified by the “bad.” *And both are the result of what a child learned from our actions.*

Whether you're a family member or are employed in the field, you may try to teach this-or-that to a child or adult with a disability, but do they see *you doing these things*? As an example, perhaps you're trying to teach a math lesson via traditional pencil and paper means, but you, personally, use your smartphone's calculator and everyone knows it. Regardless of your belief that the child/adult “needs” to learn math the way you're trying to teach it, your efforts will probably be unsuccessful because you're not modeling the actions or behavior you espouse. (To wit: do you try to get someone to stop yelling by yelling at the person?) Sit and ponder other scenarios that have happened today or yesterday or last week.

Staying on the micro level, and back to Alfie Kohn's example of how others “*experience* what we do,” a parent may be doing what she thinks is best when she enrolls her child for years and years of therapies (physical, occupational, speech, behavioral, etc.). But how does the child experience the therapy sessions? Yes, the therapists may be lovely, caring people, and the child might indicate that she “has fun” at therapy. But sooner or later, the unspoken—and devastating—message of traditional therapy (“You're not okay the way you are; we want you to be different/better,” as told to me by countless adults

with disabilities) is recognized. The child will model and internalize the actions of others, believing he's not okay and not good enough. What does that do to a person? (Note: There are many alternative ways of assisting a person that don't send negative messages, see [“The New and Improved Therapeutic Landscape”](#).)

In this day and age of reality TV shows where losers are ridiculed and school bullying is on the rise (think there's a connection?); where internet anonymity emboldens people to spew garbage they would never express in a face-to-face encounter; and where trust in leaders and traditionally-revered public and private institutions is eroding, the consequences of modeling—for good or ill—need our attention more than ever.

None of us need to try to be perfect; that would be unachievable and a foolish waste of time. But we can be more thoughtful, more aware, more careful, and more deliberative about our words and actions, knowing that what we do and say, every minute of the day, can influence the lives of others (i.e., a person may model our words/actions *or* someone may “experience what we do” in a way we didn't intend) and can also influence our society as a whole.

Do our words and actions generate inclusion and equality for our brothers and sisters with disabilities? Or do they indicate that people with disabilities are not “good enough” so they need to be “fixed” and “placed” in “special” environments?

I don't have a disability—yet. But if I live long enough, I *will*, through an accident, illness, or the aging process. *The same is true for you.* Not being able to walk or talk wouldn't be such a big deal to me; assistive technology devices could help me move and communicate. But what would I *experience* from the actions of others? Would I enjoy the equality and inclusion I take for granted today? Or would I encounter what many people with disabilities experience: pity, segregation, exclusion, and more? What do you and I need to do to generate positive change?

Nothing is so contagious as example; and we never do any great good or evil which does not produce its like.

Francois de La Rochefoucauld