

If you wanted your child to acquire positive social skills, self-respect, and other beneficial traits, while making new friends, you might enroll her in school or community sports, church groups, or similar activities. This action on your part would send your child a strong message about your expectations for her and your belief in her abilities. In addition, you would probably do everything possible to keep your child away from others who are “troublemakers.” These efforts would also send a powerful message to your child—that you don’t want her to adopt “trouble-making” traits.

It seems we recognize the power of peer group influence in general society, but it also seems we fail to recognize this power in the lives of people with disabilities. The results of this failure are mixed messages and less-than-desirable outcomes for children and adults with disabilities.

For example, a preschooler with a disability is not yet talking. Under today’s Conventional Wisdom, this child is enrolled in a special ed preschool, where he’s surrounded by other children with speech disabilities. What will he learn from this peer group where not talking, unintelligible speech, and/or grunts and screeches are common? What about students who are put in “emotional disorder classrooms” or children with autism who are placed in “autism classrooms”? How confusing this must be to a child, when the message he receives is: “We don’t want you to head-bang, hand-bite, persevere, or have other inappropriate behaviors, but we’re going to put you in a class where these are the norm.”

Yes, we can hope children will learn from the adult “experts” in the class, but as many of us have learned, children want to please and be like their peers, not grown-ups. In *The Nurture Assumption*, author



and child development expert Judith Rich Harris writes, “Socialization is not something that grown-ups do to kids—it is something kids do to themselves.” And one way we “self-socialize” is to mimic our peers. Similar situations exist for adults with disabilities: those in the aberrant environments of segregated residential or day programs learn that aberrant behavior

is the norm, even as staff tries to eliminate such behavior!

In the mid-1800s, “special (segregated) schools” for children and young adults with disabilities represented best practices. But one of the early promoters of these schools, Samuel Gridley Howe, soon recognized their dangers. In 1866, Howe gave the keynote address at the opening of a new institution and shocked the audience by warning about the dangers of segregation:

***Be careful whom you associate with.
It is human to imitate the habits of
those with whom we interact...
One of the best ways to elevate
your character is to find worthy
role models to emulate.***
Epictetus

We should be cautious about establishing such artificial communities...for any children and youth; but more especially should we avoid them for those who have natural infirmity...Such persons spring up sporadically in the community, and they should be kept diffused among sound and normal

persons...Surround insane and excitable persons with sane people and ordinary influences; vicious children with virtuous people and virtuous influences; blind children with those who see; mute children with those who speak; and the like... [Howe, S.G. (1866) In “Ceremonies on laying the cornerstone of the New York State Institution for the Blind at Batavia,” Genes Co., NY: Henry Todd]

Why haven’t we learned much from the wisdom of the Ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus (see box), Samuel Gridley Howe in the more recent past, or Judith Rich Harris, today? When will we eliminate harmful, artificial environments? Where is our common sense? And how many more mixed messages will we send to the people we care about?