In real estate, the mantra regarding the most desirable home is, "Location, location, location!" To ensure the most desirable outcomes for individuals with disability labels, we might consider adopting a similar mantra: "Environment, environment, environment!"

Many of us are familiar with the conventional wisdom about the impact of the environment. For example, children raised by parents who have addictions are thought to be more likely to develop their own addictions. Children who are raised in stable, loving homes are thought to have a better chance of becoming stable, loving adults. As an employee, you might develop certain behaviors or characteristics that reflect the culture of your workplace. Inmates often leave prison with an increase (instead of a decrease) of "criminal behavior," as a result of the influence of the people and situations that exist in that environment. We are all products of our environment—good or bad. (And environment isn't just the physical setting, but also the people and characteristics of that setting.)

There are always exceptions to the rule, however. Some kids who grow up in great families become demons; others who grow up in demonic families turn out great. But, in general, the apple doesn't fall too far from the tree. We also know that the *amount* of time one spends in certain environments can have a significant impact on a person's life: once children enter the public school system and they're with others more than their own families, the influence of others competes with familial influence. Environment does have a profound—maybe the most profound—influence on our lives. So let's consider the environments common to many individuals who have developmental disabilities.

Many preschoolers with disabilities are enrolled in special ed preschools, surrounded by other children who have developmental delays, and professionals (teachers, therapists, etc.) who are often focused on remediating the effects of the disability. What do children learn in this environment? Yes, some probably do learn many new and helpful things (which could have been learned at home with mom or in a "regular" neighborhood preschool/daycare). But what can happen when, for example, a child who hasn't yet acquired speech is surrounded by other children who also haven't acquired speech? If we want

a child to learn to speak, doesn't it make more sense to ensure he's in an environment where other children are speaking so he can learn from others and model their speech? Some parents have recognized the awful truth: when a child with autism, for example, is surrounded by other children with autism, he often learns how to have more autism!

Think about a school clique, a gang, or even your office, and consider that the only way to survive, much less succeed, in many environments is to *model or adopt* the behaviors of others in that environment. The only other alternative is to get out! There is little or no gray area. Ditto with moving beyond addictions: it's almost impossible, for example, for a teenager to move beyond drug or alcohol addiction if he still hangs out in the same environment or with the same kids. *Environment is everything!*

Our view of the world is heavily influenced by the environment. When my son, Benjamin, was young, I made sure he was included and not segregated, by enrolling him in a typical community preschool instead of a special ed preschool. Still, from the age of four months, he spent hours each week at a clinic, receiving physical and occupational therapies. When Benjamin was a four-year-old, and using a pediatric walker for mobility, he asked me if his same-aged cousin, Colin, still walked with a walker. I didn't know what he meant, so we talked about this. Much to my dismay, I learned that Benjamin believed *every* child learned to walk using a walker! And why not? That's what he'd grown up seeing within the confines of a therapeutic clinic! Think about the person with a disability in your life: what is she learning from the environments she's in?

School-aged children with disabilities, from elementary to the high school grades, are often placed in "life-skills," "resource," or other "special" (segregated) classrooms. Again, these students are surrounded by other students with delays, and by educators whose focus is primarily addressing the consequences of the disability, instead of focusing on the whole child. These students *may* be learning whatever is being taught, but what are they also learning *from this environment?* How to have "more" of a disability, by adopting the mannerisms or behaviors of others? That they don't belong with "normal

kids?" Or that they're incompetent to learn real academics (with or without accommodations and/or curriculum modifications, per special ed law)? Sadly, what parents have learned is that, under these circumstances, their child doesn't have friends and doesn't participate in typical school activities, and worse, their child's future is dim.

But this doesn't have to be the case. In inclusive schools, students with disabilities learn alongside classmates who don't have disabilities, in general ed classrooms. They have friends, participate in school activities, get invited to birthday parties, and their futures are bright!

Many adults with disabilities spend their days in sheltered workshops, day programs, or other segregated settings, and their nights in congregate living facilities. What do they learn from these environments? Again, they may learn what they're *taught* (but they could have learned these things and more, in inclusive settings in the community), but what are they learning *from being in these environments?* For many, the lessons learned as children in special ed settings (previously described) are reinforced, day in and day out. Hopelessness, low self-esteem, and the gritty feeling of, "Is this all there is," are common. In addition, many may learn to mimic or adopt the unusual characteristics of others (including staff)!

"Separate" environments are unnatural, aberrant settings. People in these environments usually learn unnatural, aberrant lessons and acquire unnatural, aberrant behaviors and characteristics.

From personal conversations with educators, service providers, job coaches, and others who work in "special" environments, I know they have the best of intentions—but are good intentions enough? I've asked professionals: "Would you consent to being in the position of the people you serve?" Never has even *one* answered in the affirmative. Does it seem odd and disturbing that professionals in certain fields (educators,

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service providers, therapists, job coaches, etc.) can spend their days (or nights) in environments which most would probably never choose for themselves if they were the "recipients" of services, instead of the providers?

A retail employee would probably consent to being a shopper; a computer technician would probably consent to being a computer user; and a cook would probably consent to being a diner. But most prison guards probably wouldn't consent to being a prisoner—and most people who serve individuals with disabilities wouldn't consider trading places with those they serve.

Unfortunately, environments often give birth to self-fulfilling prophecies. In other words, seldom would a special ed teacher, for example, look at a child in her classroom and say, "Tommy doesn't belong here—he should be in a fifth grade classroom." Ditto most professionals in adult services when looking at an adult in a day program or a congregate living facility. The fact that a person is *in* a given environment seems to be automatic validation that that's where he belongs!

All of us—individuals with disabilities, parents, educators, and human services employees—can move toward positive and long-term change if we put ENVIRONMENT at the top of our list, regardless of a person's age, disability, or anything else. We can be guided by the common sense of our heads (which means, in part, discarding the disability diagnosis as an indicator of what environment is appropriate for a person). We can also be guided by what's in our hearts.

We can ask, "Where would this person be if she didn't have a disability?" Wherever that is, that's where the person should be! We can do what it takes to ensure the person has the accommodations, assistive technology, or other supports she needs to be successful in those natural environments. We can consider what the person wants or needs to achieve (based on his preferences), and recognize that the environment will have a profound influence on whether or not those needs and wants will be successfully achieved. Finally, we can ask ourselves, "What would I want if it were me?"