

Ask

. . . . AND YOU SHALL RECEIVE

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

We all need help. In the best case scenario, we're not afraid to ask for the help we need from family members, neighbors, friends, and even strangers.

Individuals with disabilities may need a little more help throughout their lives. Many are accustomed to receiving help from people in the human services industry. And there's little fear in asking for that type of help since these services are legally-mandated entitlements.

As more children and adults are included in schools, jobs, and community activities, they have more opportunities to interact with "ordinary people" (not just paid providers). And in the best-case scenario, they'll learn to rely on these new friends and acquaintances for help—just the way people without disabilities do. Many, however, may be hesitant or fearful to ask for assistance, or they may not know *how* to ask for what they need. But this can change!

When my son was very young, he depended primarily on me—his mom—just as most young children do. Because of his disability and his use of a wheelchair, he needed more assistance than other kids. Early on, after absorbing the wisdom of adults with developmental disabilities, I realized I would not always be around. So it was important that Benjamin learn to depend on others, starting at home, of course, with his dad and sister. The rule in our home became: Benj needed to ask for help from whoever was closest to him at that moment. (Isn't that what most people do—grab help from whoever is closest?) So, sometimes big sister, Emily, helped; sometimes it was Dad or Mom.

This rule was transferred and expanded when Benj entered the neighborhood inclusive elementary school. I told my son's teachers, "An adult should step in and help Benj *only if a child can't do it.*" There was no reason for a teacher or teacher's aide to help Benj with his coat, backpack, and many other things. Kids help each other all the time!

But I realized there's more to successfully assisting someone than meets the eye. It's important that the

person who needs assistance knows *how to ask* for the help he needs—and Benjamin taught me this valuable lesson!

For years, I helped Benj get dressed every morning before school. My husband, Mark, left for work before the kids were up. One Saturday morning, Benjamin (at age 8 or 9) decided he wanted Daddy to help him get dressed on the weekends. *Yippee*—I could live with that! But my joy was short-lived as I heard Benjamin screaming and crying and his Dad yelling back! Rushing to the bedroom, I discovered my son angrily venting his frustration because my husband wasn't following the "dressing routine" Benj and I had followed for years.

When I asked Benj why he just didn't *tell* his Dad how to do it the "right" way, the tears continued to flow as he replied, "I didn't know *how!*" Point taken. Right then and there, we helped Benj figure out *how* to tell someone the best way to help him.

We've continued this practice over the years, with great results! For years, Benj stayed close to me while shopping at "superstores." As time went by, he started feeling more secure about exploring on his own. I explained how to go up and down the aisles looking for me if he felt he was lost. Imagine my surprise when a voice over the store intercom announced, "Would Kathie Snow please come to register six?" Benj couldn't find me, but he figured out how to ask for help!

One of our shopping routines was to grab sodas out of the refrigerated case by the check-out stand to drink on the way home. Emily and Benj routinely begged for Mountain Dew, but I restricted them to a non-caffeine soda. By this time, Benj was 12 or 13, and he roamed the video department while his sister browsed in clothes and I shopped for food. During one of these adventures, I told my kids to meet me at 5:00 PM by the check-out stands. At the appointed time, Emily showed up, but there was no sign of Benj. I was prepared to page *him*, then he wheeled up, face aglow. "Guess what? I drank a Mountain Dew," he proudly

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announced. Shocked, I asked him if he got it out of the refrigerated case by himself. He nodded yes. “How did you get it open,” I asked (Benj can’t unscrew bottle tops). “Well, I found a really nice lady to open it for me,” he said, with an even bigger smile.

I looked for the bottle in his wheelchair basket, but found none. “What did you do with the bottle,” I asked. “Well, I found *another* nice lady to throw it away for me,” he replied—beaming—and then added, “Are you proud of me?” How could I resist? I said I was very proud of him for finding the help he needed, but reminded him that he had not paid for the soda before he drank it, and that he had essentially stolen it! Fear washed over his face until I said I would pay for the soda and he could pay me back.

If we hope children and adults with disabilities will be interdependent and included in ordinary activities in our communities, they need to be able to seek help from anyone: a classmate, a coworker, store clerk, neighbor, or even a stranger. In addition, they need to know *how* to ask for the help they need. And, again, they may need assistance in learning how to ask.

It’s common for those who are closest to a person with a disability (family members, service providers, etc.) to “know” what the person needs by a look, a phrase or sound, or even by the circumstances. And sometimes, the person with a disability doesn’t even *need to ask for help*—again, if we feel we “know” what the person needs, we just do it. But this may not be helpful in the long run, since the person doesn’t learn *how* to ask for help.

So one way to *really* help is to *stop helping so much!* In other words, don’t automatically “do” for the person; wait and/or encourage him to ask for help. This will, in the long run, be one of the most important skills a person will acquire: the ability to speak up for himself!

For specific situations (shopping, in school, at work, etc.), we can talk things over with the person and suggest ideas, role play, and/or encourage the person to just do it, knowing that practice makes perfect. I wasn’t with Benjamin when he asked those two nice ladies to open his soda and then dispose of the evidence! I have no idea *how* he asked for the help he needed, but it worked—and it’s something we never specifically practiced. I assume the “asking for help” experiences Benj had at home and in school prepared him for the Sneaking-the-Mountain-Dew episode!

Many parents and professionals worry, worry, worry about what will happen to a person with a disability when she’s “in the community.” They worry how the person will survive, if others will take advantage of her, and more. In fact, many children and adults with disabilities are *prevented* from participating in ordinary activities in inclusive settings because of these worries. If, however, the person learns to ask for what she needs

and to speak for herself (using whatever form of communication is most effective), we need not worry.

The world is full of good people—people just like you and me—who stand ready to help. When we’re sharing space with nameless strangers, we may not feel we’re sur-

rounded by potential sources of assistance. But when we ask for what we need, and when we’re specific, a nameless stranger can become a friendly acquaintance in the blink of an eye.

And consider how society’s perception of people with disabilities might change. Many who only *see* my son wheeling through a store may have negative, even pitiful, perceptions of him. But I feel sure the two ladies who helped him that day with his Mountain Dew came away with a positive perspective of him and, perhaps, of others with disabilities. And his good manners—he’s great with “please” and “thank you”—surely impressed them! The same can be true for others.

Ask and you shall receive. And in many cases, you may receive even more than you asked for!

**The race of mankind would perish
did they cease to aid each other.
We cannot exist without mutual help.
All therefore that need aid have a
right to ask it from their fellow men;
and no one who has the power of
granting can refuse it without guilt.**

Sir Walter Scott