

How?

is the Question

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow

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“No, not yet—you can’t be in general ed classes, be involved in the community, have a job, live on our own or [fill-in-the-blank]. . . because you can’t walk, talk, read at grade level, wipe your own behind, cook, behave, and/or [fill-in-the-blank]. You’re just not ready, the teacher/employer/community isn’t ready, we don’t do that here, and/or it just won’t work...”

These and a myriad of similar statements create an inviolate wall of separation—an attitudinal barrier—that results in segregation, isolation, and loss of opportunities for children and adults with disabilities. We seem to be stuck in the muck, *unable or unwilling* to wriggle free and find *creative solutions* to ensure people with disabilities are included in all aspects of our society and are living real lives.

If we have been *unwilling*, we should have the integrity to state our position honestly—to admit that we are, indeed, unwilling—rather than spew a variety of excuses, including “blaming” the person with a disability. Honesty is always better than little white lies, half-truths, exaggerations, or deception. And while such honesty may generate frustration, sadness, or anger in the person on the receiving end, it also allows that person to see things as they really are and to then move on, find other options, etc. (And those of us who are on the receiving end of “no” should learn to ask the nay-sayers: “Are you unwilling or unable?”

There *is* a difference!) In addition to admitting our unwillingness, we should also have the decency to acknowledge that our decisions may have contributed to negative consequences for a child or adult with a disability, and as moral human beings, we should assume our share of responsibility for the difficulties we may have caused in another’s life.

If we have been *willing*, but somehow *unable* to arrive at the right solution, perhaps it’s because our

creative juices have dried up, we’ve hit a seemingly insurmountable bump in the road, we think it will cost too much, and/or . . .

Either position—unwilling or unable—may also have been the result of limited vision, following old ways of thinking, or other attitudinal barriers. But asking “How?” can eliminate these barriers, opening our minds to a world of possibilities, for we begin seeing things in a whole new way!

- How can Stephen be successfully included in general education classes?
- How can Maria live in her own place?
- How can Eric participate in the Boy Scouts?
- How can John be an effective employee?
- How can Mrs. Thomas include a student with a disability in her high school classroom?
- How can Mr. Matthews ensure his place of business is accessible and welcoming for all employees?
- How can we find the money?

Asking “How?” in a classroom; on the job; at home; at a community activity; at an IEP, IHP, or other PP meeting; and/or in any other setting can

be the opening of a brainstorming session that can generate a flurry of great ideas. Assistive technology, supports, accommodations, or modifications might be

just the ticket to ensure a child or adult with a disability can be successful at school, in the community, on the job, or at home. More training, environmental alterations, using the expertise of people with disabilities/families, or other changes may be what’s needed by teachers, employers, leaders of community activities, and others.

Reviewing the scenarios above, Stephen can be included in general ed classrooms if he’s provided

***It all depends on how we look at things,
and not how they are in themselves.***

Carl Jung

2 - "How?" is the Question

with certain assistive technology devices. Maria can live in her own place if she has some supports or accommodations in the kitchen and bathroom. Eric can participate in Boy Scouts if some of the activities are modified. John can be an effective employee if he has a couple of mentors he can call on for help. Mrs. Thomas can include a student with a disability if she works closely with the student, his parents, and the special ed department. Mr. Matthews can ensure his business is accessible by making some environmental changes. We can find the money by investigating grants and other funding sources, collaborating with community service groups, and/or spreading the word about what we need to all who will listen. While these are generalized examples, they *do* represent real-life experiences.

In my son's life, we never presumed the diagnosis of cerebral palsy was an automatic barrier to Benjamin's success. Instead, asking "How?" from the time he was very young helped us figure out what was needed to ensure Benjamin can lead a real life, successfully included in any arena: the neighborhood preschool; general ed classes; T-ball, karate, drama classes, and other community activities; and today, college. Other people with disabilities and families, in collaboration with caring and open-minded educators, day care providers, community leaders, etc., have done the same. But we're in the minority, as evidenced by the majority of children and adults with disabilities who are segregated in special programs and isolated from real-life experiences, with little hope of living a wonderful, ordinary life or achieving their dreams.

The dictionary on my computer defines "how" as "in what way or manner; by what means." Every

day, people who do not have disabilities ensure their own personal success, as well as the the success of their children, their families, their jobs/businesses, etc., by a variety of means, and it all begins with asking questions such as:

- How can we take that trip to Hawaii?
- How can we buy a new home?
- How can we afford college tuition?
- How can we increase sales?

Asking "How?" can turn dreams into realities. In these and similar situations we don't automatically eliminate the idea as unrealistic or impossible, nor we feel the need to justify or prove our case. So why do we impose such standards on people who happen to have disabilities?

Whether you've been unwilling or unable, examine your position and your motives. Are your actions the result of fear, apathy, laziness, or ignorance?

Or perhaps you're robotically following rules, policies and procedures, or conventional wisdom. If you're an educator, employer, or serve in any decision-making role, has a person with a disability or family member offered solutions, and you've pooh-poohed their ideas? Regardless of the "why" of one's actions, the outcomes are the same: segregation, isolation, loss of opportunities, and other less

than desirable outcomes for children and adults with disabilities. We all have the power to create positive change. Don't we also have an ethical responsibility to do so?

Ask "How?" with an open, creative mind. Look at the situation differently. Believe in possibilities. Then be astounded by the changes in your perceptions, attitudes, and actions—and celebrate the awesome improvements in the life of a child or adult with disability!

Sometimes the situation is only a problem because it is looked at in a certain way. Looked at in another way, the right course of action may be so obvious that the problem no longer exists.

Edward de Bono