

# Safety First

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

The safety of children and adults with disabilities is paramount in the minds of many: family members, teachers, service providers, and others. A variety of different statistics indicate people with disabilities experience abuse (sexual, physical, verbal, etc.) at much higher rates than people without disabilities, so concerns for their safety are justified.

Unfortunately, the methods used to create a wall of safety around them have not always been effective, and may have even *contributed* to people being more vulnerable. Furthermore, the efforts of others to keep people safe may prevent them from being able to *keep themselves safe*. So let's rethink this...

How do people *without* disabilities maintain their own safety? "Fight or flight" is the most primitive response to danger. You can choose to fight or run away; you can call out for help, too. You also make decisions every day to stay away from dangerous people and places, and ensure you're with people and in places where you feel safe. Think of other things you do. Finally, adults teach children about "good touches and bad touches," what to do if approached by a stranger, and more.

Now let's think about people with disabilities. If you cannot push yourself in a wheelchair, how can you get away from any danger? You can't. But in a power wheelchair, you could. Once my son, Benjamin, started using a power chair at age nine, I seldom worried about his safety; how many potential kidnappers have a wheelchair-accessible van?

If I had to do it over again, Benjamin would have had a power chair when he was two, so he could go on his own *and* be safe on his own. When he used a walker or his manual wheelchair (which he could push for only short distances and very slowly), someone needed to be close by. During this time, perfect strangers routinely got up-close-and-personal and patted him on the head, prayed over him, or hugged him (and maybe tried to cop a feel in the process)—

things they would never do to a child who didn't have a disability. At that time, we taught him to put his hands out and say, "I don't know you," and to yell for help if necessary. Everything changed with the power chair; he could get away, or in a worst-case scenario, he could run 'em down—he's driving a lethal weapon!

How could children or adults with disabilities call for help if they don't speak and don't have a communication device/system so they can communicate with any one at any time? Are people with cognitive disabilities presumed to be incapable of learning, so no one tries to teach them self-protection skills? And do we assume that people with disabilities will be surrounded by "caregivers," so they don't *need to learn* how to keep themselves safe?

The reality is that most abuse occurs at the hands of someone who is close to you (including parents, educators, service providers, and/or others), not a stranger! Every week I receive a disability-related newsletter that almost always includes reports of abuse perpetrated on a person with a disability by employees of a residential facility, special ed classroom, special ed bus, and/or other "special" (segregated) environments. Most people who work in the field are probably trustworthy, but some are not. So how safe are children or adults with disabilities if they don't have the tools (power mobility, communication aids, etc.) or the skills to *keep themselves safe*?

"Troy," a school-aged boy with autism was finally provided an effective way to communicate when he was ten. His parents said it was the best of times and the worst of times, and it was like Troy had been reborn. He was able to tell his parents how others had abused him at school. He was also able—for the first time in his life—to tell his family and others how he felt, what he needed, and much more. Ten years' of stored-up memories (good and bad) all came out. His "inappropriate and aggressive behaviors" diminished almost overnight, since he was no longer frustrated when others didn't understand what he wanted and

**Once you have discovered what is happening, you can't pretend not to know, you can't abdicate responsibility.**

P. D. James

## 2 - Safety First

needed. Not only did his personal safety improve, but so did *everything* about his life, including his relationships with family and others.

What about personal power and safety? Do we teach children with disabilities (who become adults!) about “good touches and bad touches,” and do we also respect a child when he resists touches that are uncomfortable? Adults with disabilities have shared childhood stories that are all too similar: being taken to therapy where you’re on the receiving end of very intimate touching by therapists (similar situations may occur in schools, at the hands of therapists and/or educators). Sometimes therapy physically hurts; other times it may feel uncomfortable for any number of reasons.

I vividly recall an episode when my then two-year-old son was receiving physical and occupational therapies at a well-respected center. Another two-year-old boy with cerebral palsy was lying on a mat; his mother sat nearby as the physical therapist stretched the little boy’s legs. He screamed and cried; the therapist did not stop, *and* his mother threatened in an angry voice, “You better cooperate and stop crying, or I’m gonna’ spank you when we get home!” The boy’s screams turned to whimpers and moans, but his tears continued. I tried to politely intervene, but was brushed off.

Adults with disabilities have shared that this type of situation (which may happen countless times throughout a child’s life) taught them a devastating lesson: their “No” means nothing. They feel powerless to protect themselves from another’s hurtful actions—resistance is futile.

No person should ever be hurt in the name of “help.” And, no, I’m not saying, for example, that a person should never be given treatment because it might cause pain. Life-saving medical care might often cause pain. I’m talking about questioning and changing the non-life-saving interventions, treatments, programs, etc. that can cause emotional

and/or physical pain over and over and over again. We can, if we choose, use alternative methods that do not cause harm.

Finally, we often “place” children or adults with disabilities (like they’re pieces of furniture) in segregated classrooms/programs, believing sheltered environments will provide a level of safety. But, again, reported cases of abuse are all too common in those environments. When my son was in general ed classrooms, I never worried about his safety; no teacher would have abused him, since other students would tell someone. The same is not true in a “special,” segregated classroom, for example, filled with students with disabilities who may have limited communication and/or who may not be believed. Furthermore,

it’s almost impossible to learn how to get along in the Real World in these artificial environments—segregated “placements” can set people up for failure.

The right thing to do is to ensure people with disabilities have the tools they need (power mobility, communication devices, and/or anything else) so they can

enjoy their birthright: full participation, included in all areas of society, *and* “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.” A person who can’t walk needs a mobility device that enables her to go when and where she wants without being dependent on others. A child who cannot speak should be able to express, “I love you, Mommy,” with his communication device. People who are being helped should not be hurt in the process. Children and adults with disabilities, like people without disabilities, need power and control over their own lives. Keep thinking...

If we won’t do these and other things because they’re morally and ethically the right things to do, shouldn’t we choose to do them from a sense of responsibility toward another’s personal power and safety? Isn’t it our duty to put a person’s *real safety*—not feigned “protection”—first? How much longer will our actions or inactions *contribute* to the vulnerability of people we say we care about, and will we hold ourselves accountable for the consequences?

**A person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but by his inactions, and in either case he is justly accountable to them for the injury.**

*John Stuart Mill*