

Invisible Abilities

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

I have long wondered about “compensatory skills”—the notion that when a person does not have one particular physical ability, other abilities are enhanced and can compensate for the “missing” ability. Before I knew anything about disabilities (prior to my son being born in 1987), I was familiar with the idea that people who have little or no sight, for example, may have extra-sensitive touch or hearing, which enables them to successfully move through space by “seeing” in other ways. I don’t know if this is 100 percent accurate then or now, nor do I know if the idea of compensatory skills in every person could be scientifically proven. But it makes sense to me.

My son, Benjamin, has cerebral palsy, and when he was very little (and we did not yet understand the value of independent mobility, even for little bitty kiddos), he wasn’t able to move around and learn from his environment the way most babies and toddlers do. For most children in the early years, movement (running, walking, sitting, jumping, etc.) is used as a primary learning technique. Benjamin could do none of those things on his own, and as he grew, we noticed he had incredible hearing and auditory memory skills. It seems that this way of learning (auditory) helped compensate for what he was unable to learn or do through mobility. As a result, language and words became critically important to him. It seemed the hunger for experimentation and learning had to be quenched one way or another, and we tried to meet that need by reading to him, then helping him learn to read (using a variety of strategies and assistive technology devices). Simultaneously, Benjamin discovered the power of his own words by learning to write on the computer (beginning at age four, again via a variety of strategies and assistive technology).

As a young adult today, Benjamin wants to become a journalist. Words and language—not body movements—are his power. Through the years, I’ve heard similar stories about children with disabilities

from other parents. They, too, are aware of their children’s “invisible abilities”—abilities that are a strong foundation on which to build a successful life!

So I was very intrigued by the “Reading Faces” article in the January 2004 *Smithsonian*. The story is about Paul Ekman, a psychologist, professor, and expert at reading faces. Author Richard Conniff writes, “Ekman and Wallace Friesen, both psychologists at the University of California at San Francisco, developed a scientific way to recognize and interpret every possible human facial expression. Their Facial Action Coding System, or FACS, has become [an] essential tool . . .” and Ekman’s research has been used by a diverse group—from federal counterintelligence units to film animators.

The entire article was fascinating, and Ekman has written several books on this and similar topics. But here’s what I found most interesting in this magazine article: before humans developed language, they communicated through facial expressions, and our ancestors were very good at reading faces. As time went on, however, humans came to rely *less* on facial expressions and *more* on the words that came from someone’s mouth, which diminished the ability to understand the expressive communication generated by facial expressions. But in Ekman’s research, he found that people who had strokes or other brain conditions which caused them to be “less attentive to speech” had extraordinary talent for reading faces: “They picked out the liars 73 percent of the time, an accuracy level rivaled . . . only by agents of the U.S. Secret Service.” This is amazing and wonderful—what an extraordinary skill!

You may be nodding your head in agreement. Again, many parents are aware of their children’s abilities. Some have shared personal insights that their children with autism and other conditions—who may fall into the category of being “less attentive to speech”—often demonstrate extraordinary sensitivities

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to non-oral communication (facial expressions and behavior of others). And this is contrary to a common belief that children and adults with autism are “insensitive” to the emotions of others. Perhaps some children or adults with autism *are* less sensitive to sounds and language, and, sadly, it may be assumed that they’re “unable to connect with others.” But we may have overlooked their ability to connect via facial expressions and body language!

Additionally, many people believe that individuals who don’t speak and/or who show little or no interest in language are “in their own world,” and “unable” to form relationships. I hope those who hold this belief will reconsider. Think about it: if, for whatever reason, a person’s ability to receive or understand language is diminished, the acquisition of a compensatory skill—like reading faces or body language—makes sense!

Now consider what it might be like if *you* were unable to respond to others via oral communication. People may think you have “subnormal intelligence;” they may talk about you in front of you, because they assume you don’t understand; and/or their *words* may say one thing, but their *facial expressions* convey something else. Under any or all of these situations, you would most likely react negatively. Furthermore, since you can’t communicate your dismay with words, you’ll do it the only way you can—through your own facial expressions, body language, and/or behavior. And the result: you’ll probably be diagnosed with “behavior problems.”

Imagine how things could change if we presumed that people who don’t have the usual oral communication *do* have compensatory skills. What

if we presumed they can read our facial expressions and/or body language? What if we recognized that they would know when we’re lying, because they could pick up on facial cues *that we may not know we’re projecting*? And what if we recognized that *their* facial expressions, body language, and/or behavior are *their* most effective ways of communicating, instead of assuming these represent “inappropriate behaviors”?

If we adopt these assumptions, *we* might become more sensitive, more open, and more honest. We would, in short, *improve our own behavior*, which is the best way to improve our relationships with others!

Individuals with disabilities and those closest to them—especially family members—are experts on this subject. Unfortunately, however, many (if not most) invisible abilities

are not included in developmental charts and other typical assessment tools and tests. As a result, these invisible abilities are often overlooked and/or discounted by professionals. For example, when my son was very young, he received many “zeroes” on traditional assessments, and was said to be “extremely delayed” in his development. And when I shared that my then three-year-old son could repeat—verbatim—*Thomas the Tank Engine* stories (including mimicking the British accent of Mr. Conductor) this skill was dismissed as irrelevant by the experts. Yet my son’s auditory memory skills and his power with words and language are the key to his success, now and in the future!

It’s time for us to recognize, value, and build upon the invisible abilities of those who have been marginalized and devalued by traditional assessments. When we do, we’ll see the real person—and new doors of opportunity will be opened.

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