No Child (or adult) Needs an Aide

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow

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That's right: no child needs an aide! In a general ed classroom, the *teacher* might need an aide, but no child needs an aide. There are many negative consequences to attaching a grown-up to a child, and there are also many ways to provide the assistance a student with a disability might need. Both will be explored (and the same issues can be applied to adults with disabilities, as well). But first, let's review today's conventional wisdom on this issue.

Generally, the issue has been framed this way:

> Students with disabilities belong in special ed classrooms because they need all the special assistance and training that can only be provided by special ed staff. If, however, it's decided to "place" a student with a disability in a general ed classroom, this can occur only if the student has a one-on-one aide.

This paradigm is erroneous, as well as harmful, for a variety of reasons. First, it does not represent the spirit or intent of the "least restrictive environments" of IDEA (federal special ed law), in that an age-appropriate, general ed classroom in the neighborhood school is supposed to be the first option considered by the IEP team. In reality, however, this is seldom the case. Instead, many school districts automatically place students with disabilities in the most restrictive setting (a special ed classroom). This is a unilateral decision made by educators, not by the IEP team. Parents are (illegally) shut out of the placement process, and if they want other options for their child, a fight ensues, which the parents usually lose.

Second, it's based on the archaic prejudice that a student with a disability will inherently create problems in a general ed classroom. The child is being prejudged—and there is nothing more unfair, cruel, and harmful! Every day, millions of students with disabilities are denied the opportunity to learn, to make friends, and to laugh and play and grow alongside other children in the community. The educational segregation of students with disabilities results in a sub-standard education, which leads to the shameful estimated 75 percent unemployment rate of people with disabilities!

Third, this paradigm is based on the assumption that one person—the aide—can and should be responsible for supporting the student. All students need supports; that's why we have teachers, books, computers, and a host of other people, technology, tools, etc. Students with disabilities may need more supports. But the current paradigm is based on the erroneous belief that one person—a one-on-one aide—can and should be responsible for meeting the student's needs.

In the process, confusion reigns over "who's in charge." The student (along with the aide) are in the general ed classroom, but the student and the aide "belong" to the special ed department. The general ed teacher may have little interest in the student and/or little influence in her own classroom. Turf battles are not uncommon.

The aide may end up with full responsibility for the student, yet she's given little authority or power regarding the implementation of the student's IEP and other critically important aspects of the student's education. In some schools, this most-responsible-person isn't even allowed to attend the IEP meetings! The aide and the student are in a lose-lose predicament. These are, of course, general observations, and there are always exceptions. In some schools, the situation is much better; and in others, it's much worse. But instead of putting all the responsibility on the shoulders of one person, we can and should explore a variety of strategies to support a student with a disability and ensure success for all.

Unfortunately, the "student-must-have-an-aide" belief has been used as the justification to continue educational segregation. Some educators say they can't afford to include students with disabilities in general ed classrooms because they don't have the funds to

hire one-on-one aides for all students with disabilities. Thus, inclusive classrooms are off the table. There's no doubt that some educators just don't want to include students with disabilities in general ed classrooms, and this is an effective justification. Other educators, however, may want to move toward inclusive practices, and have bought into this rationale simply because they haven't considered other alternatives.

Still, in schools here and there, inclusive practices are slowly emerging, and we see a variety of roles of "helpers"—described as a one-on-one, aide, shadow, para-educator, para-pro, teacher's assistant, instructional assistant, and/or other title. These words are often used interchangeably, but the descriptor used often represents the role this person plays, the responsibilities, and even the person's value, as well as the "status" of the student being helped!

For example, consider the differences between a "shadow" and an "instructional assistant"—two positions on opposite ends of the spectrum. In general, a shadow is "assigned" to one student and is responsible for keeping the student on-task, controlling the child's behavior, and/or, sadly, preventing the student from "disrupting" the classroom or "bothering" the teacher. In contrast, the responsibility of an instructional assistant is to help students *learn and succeed.*

Thus, it's easy to see that the role assigned reflects a school's values—about its students and its staff. In schools where a shadow (or someone in a similar role) is used, students with disabilities are "allowed" to be in a general ed classroom so long as they don't cause any "problems." This might be presented as "inclusion," but in reality, students with disabilities are not really part of the classroom, and whether they learn or not is often irrelevant. But schools that use instructional assistants see students with disabilities as learners, and they do what it takes to ensure all students belong and all students learn—together.

Way back in the early 1990s, my children's elementary school embraced inclusive practices, along with a shift in the roles of staff. The following is from Principal Mike Galvin (and is an excerpt from an article entitled, "Inclusive Education: A Principal's Perspective," an interview with Mike which is also in my *Disability is Natural* book):

Why would we assume that every child with a disability needs an adult with him all the time? If you subscribe to the belief that everyone is either "able" or "unable," then you may feel a child with a disability needs an aide. But all of us have a continuum of strengths to needs.

Things aren't black or white! *Who really has a disability?* Research has shown that deciding which students "need" an IEP is a purely subjective decision. It's not based on an objective disability category. Instead, it's based on educators deciding to staff a student into special ed because they think that's the best way to help a child with a disability. At that point, the child is turned over to the special ed teachers. This is not a good way to share responsibility.

In our school, we saw it this way: all students would be in regular classrooms, and if a classroom teacher had a student with significant needs, then another set of hands, eyes, or ears were probably needed. And that meant a person would be assigned to assist *the teacher and the classroom,* not just the child. The role of an assistant is to provide services to help a child learn and to level the playing field.

There can be many dangers when an adult is assigned to the child. Kathie, you taught me that "a full-time aide becomes a maid." A one-on-one para doesn't help a child become responsible for himself. A person in this role may actually feel sorry for the child, have low expectations for him, and/or do too much for him. In too many cases, a child actually *learns dependence!*

A para assigned to one child can send a very powerful message that the classroom teacher isn't really responsible for the child—the para is. When one person is assigned to a child, only that person gets to know the child. Kids with disabilities don't "belong" to the special ed department or the one-on-one aides! But this is what often happens if there's not a sense of shared responsibility for all students. In an inclusive school, the para, the classroom teacher, and the special ed teacher all work together in the regular classroom to ensure all kids are supported in their learning. Sometimes the para works directly with a student with a disability, other times the classroom or special ed teacher provides direct instruction. Again, it's very important to use a variety of instructional methods that meet the child's individual needs.

We've mistakenly assumed that only adults should help children with disabilities. But children help one another all the time. So we need to make sure peer supports are in place, too. Kathie, I remember something you told us once about Benjamin: that before an adult stepped in to help Benjamin, we should first see if a child couldn't help. We realized Benjamin's classmates

> could help him with his coat and his backpack, as well as with many other things. Sometimes a peer can help a child learn math better than an adult can. We learned to focus on providing the most natural supports in the classroom.
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> Some needs, of course, can only be met by an adult helper; like when a child needs to be physically transferred to the toilet, for example. Even then, this responsibility should be shared among a variety of adults. If only one person knows how to do this, what happens if/when the person isn't there? [Author's note: Mike, as well as other educators at Columbine—not just the paras—helped my son in the bathroom. And no one thought this was a big deal—it was a natural outcome of the pervasive caring.]
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> Classmates can do a great deal. Friends can help a child in the lunchroom, during academics, on the playground, and everywhere else. This informal type of assistance routinely occurs among kids without disabilities. Why shouldn't it happen to kids with disabilities, too?

And here's what Mike had to say about the students who are often the least likely to be welcomed in general ed classrooms:

> The safety of all students is a real concern of teachers and administrators, and there is a fear of students who are considered "disruptive." But, again, pervasive caring is what's needed. We looked at what *caused* a child's behavior to escalate, then we worked on *preventing* that by creating an atmosphere in which the child was supported. And that support comes from teachers and other students, in a variety of ways, to meet the child's needs. For example, some children need to be able to physically move around when they're learning, so teachers allowed that. Whether or not a child is "disruptive" is often subjective, and it's tied to the classroom environment, the teacher's style, and more. Our teachers used very creative methods of helping children, and sometimes that meant modifying the environment to meet a child's needs. If a child is supported, feels good about himself, and is engaged in something meaningful, "disruptive behaviors" often disappear.

Mike noted some of the unintended negative consequences when a student has a one-on-one, and there are others that are all too common. For example, when a one-on-one is attached to a student, it can be very difficult for the student to make friends—kids don't want to hang out with someone who has an adult around all the time!

The presence of the one-on-one also sends a clear message: this child is incompetent. And the message has a profoundly dire impact on how the child sees himself, and how his classmates see him. As a result, the presence of an aide can actually create "behavior problems" (and/or exacerbate existing tensions). A child with a disability is not stupid—she can see that she's the only student with a grown-up attached to her. Again, having a one-on-one aide makes the child feel incompetent. Most of us would do whatever it takes to make that feeling go away! In order to protect his dignity, privacy, and more, the child may passively ignore the dictates of the aide or he may actively resist. In either case (and everything in between), his behavior is seen as non-compliant. To educators (and maybe even his parents), this behavior is "proof" that a one-on-one is an absolute necessity, and so even greater control is exerted by the aide. The child reacts, the aide does, too, and a battle of wills ensues, with the child usually on the losing end. The alternative to trying to "manage a student's behavior" is to create a caring environment for all students, which will help prevent outbursts or disruptive behavior, as Mike described.

As previously mentioned, instead of putting all the responsibility for student support on the shoulders of one person, we can and should first explore how assistive technology, supports, modifications, and/or peer support can reduce or eliminate the need for one-on-one assistance. For example, the school may assign an aide to a child for physical assistance, such as: writing for the child, pushing his wheelchair, feeding the child, talking for him, and similar activities. But if the child is provided a computer and the appropriate software, she no longer needs an aide for writing. If he has a power wheelchair, there's no need for an aide to push him. Even if he remains in a manual wheelchair, other students can help push him from class to class. (In my son's case, other students fought over who would help him—there's no lack of help when it comes to using classmates!) In the cafeteria, adapted utensils, finger foods, and/or classmates helping at lunch can eliminate the need for a one-on-one. And a communication device will allow the child to speak for herself.

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Making changes to the classroom environment can reap huge benefits for all. For example, creating a quiet corner where a stressed-out student can choose to go can reduce or eliminate disruptive behavior. A bean bag chair with some books, toys, or other enjoyable materials behind a curtain in the corner of the room will be a site that's visited by many students—not just the student with a disability. Many teachers have learned to use different instructional strategies for a student with a disability, and in the process, they also learn that these work better for students without disabilities, too. There are many methods to enhance learning for all students while simultaneously reducing the need for one-on-one assistance for a student with a disability.

Instructional assistants represent an incredibly valuable resource that can enrich an entire school—and that's something to get excited about! Assistants can work in the background by modifying curriculum: adapting reading materials, math worksheets, and so much more. They can also become co-teachers; the classroom teacher takes half the class and the assistant takes the other half, and everyone benefits. Add a special ed teacher as a co-teacher and the class can be divided into thirds—even better for all!

When dividing a class into small groups, experience reveals that mixed-ability groups are preferable to grouping children into "low" or "high" groups. In the latter situation, the lows stay low, and the highs stay high. But in mixed-ability groups, students who may be struggling with reading or math, for example, learn from (and are motivated by) their peers. Many educators have been thrilled to watch students helping each other learn in ways no teacher could match!

Furthermore, how can a school use volunteers in the classroom—parents, community members, high school or college students doing an internship, and others? How many other valuable resources are being overlooked?

When it comes to adults with disabilities, we can apply the same principles and look to a variety of supports—not just one individual aide—to ensure success at home, at work, and in the community. What pieces of assistive technology can replace human assistance? What support from friends, neighbors, or co-workers can replace paid support from an aide?

As Principal Mike noted, assigning a one-on-one aide to a child can encourage the growth of helplessness and learned dependence. And children who grow up in a helpless state (including those in segregated special ed classrooms) become helpless adults. So there are many short-term and long-term unintended negative consequences of our efforts to "help."

If you're a parent, think about what supports could be put in place for your child which would reduce the need for adult assistance and how an instructional assistant—not a one-on-one aide—could be helpful to your child and your child's teachers. If you're a teacher, imagine the many ways an instructional assistant could help you *and* all the students in your classroom. If you're a teacher's "helper" of any kind, how could your skills and talents be better utilized? And all of us need to be thoughtful about the short- and long-term outcomes for students with disabilities: do our efforts promote inclusion, self-reliance, and positive perceptions of students with disabilities or exclusion, helplessness, and negative perceptions?

Let's go back to the beginning of Mike's thoughts: it's all about our belief system, not about the student's diagnosis. When we change our *beliefs,* changes in our actions will follow.

When we eliminate the educational stigmas that are part and parcel of the concepts of "disability," "special ed," and "IEP," we'll recognize that a child with a disability in school is first and foremost a student. And when we elevate children with disabilities to their rightful place as equally valuable members of the student body—*as learners, just like other students*—we will, in turn, elevate those assigned to help them. We'll move from using aides who are expected to control students, to instructional assistants who are expected to help all students learn.