Developmental Age

vs.

Chronological Age

15 12 6 7 24 10

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

The "developmental (or functional) age" concept is a disability-world paradigm that should make us halt in our tracks. Many children and adults with disabilities are routinely graded against a "developmental scale." If a person's abilities are substantially lower than the "norm," he may be saddled with a "developmental age." His chronological age—his real age—is dismissed as irrelevant. From then on, services, education, and even the way he's treated by family members may be based on his developmental age. Yikes!

For example, if a 15-year-old has a developmental age of 10, he may be *treated* like a 10-year-old, at home, in school, and in other environments. This sets up low expectations, and his opportunities to *be* a 15-year-old are limited or nonexistent! So is there any wonder why he may *seem* like a 10-year-old? He's simply doing what's expected of him! This concept reinforces the dangerous "not ready" mentality—a paradigm that actively prevents people from living any semblance of a real life.

A developmental age generally applies to one narrow aspect of a person's life—like physical, emotional, intellectual, etc.—but it's often *generalized to the whole person!* This is patently unfair and can cause great harm.

During my son's kindergarten IEP (Individualized Educational Program) meeting, the physical therapist shared her report with the IEP team. When she read, "Benjamin functions at the level of an eight-month-old," I thought the kindergarten teacher was going to faint. I, on the other hand, was horrified that my son was portrayed this way. Luckily, five-year-old Benjamin was at the meeting, and his presence refuted this testimony! He was sitting at a little table, "reading" a book out loud (one of many he had *memorized*). When the kindergarten teacher heard the "eight-month-old" level, she looked from the therapist to Benjamin and back again several times.

I realized the therapist was talking about his "gross motor" skills, and interrupted her report to share this with the others at the meeting. Since Benjamin had never crawled when he was "supposed to" at age eight months, his "development" (gross motor) was—and would be forever, I suppose—"fixed" at the level of an infant. But the therapist did not say, "gross motor development"—she said, "functions at the level of an eight-month-old"! If Benjamin had not been in attendance at that IEP meeting so the teacher could see who he *really* is, his opportunities for inclusion would have been diminished. The teacher would have probably insisted that he could not be in her classroom that year. But his physical presence at the IEP meeting demonstrated that he was definitely not like an eight-month-old!

While doing presentations around the country, I routinely meet parents who have accepted the developmental age mentality. They describe their children by their disabilities, and include a statement like, "Brian is eight, but he functions at the level of a four-year-old." Egads! Who made this ridiculous presumption? And why would anyone believe it—*especially the child's own parent?*

Brian might have "tested" at the level of a four-year-old on *one type of assessment or another,* but at age eight, he has double the life experience of a four-year-old, so how in the world can we say he "functions" like a four-year-old?

Let's use our common sense here! Children who *do not* have disabilities are all over the map in their

development! A 10-year-old may read like a 13-year-old, play soccer like a 16-year-old, and behave like an eight-year-old—and he's considered "normal!" Then there are adults *without* disabilities, like myself: at the age of 51, I routinely vacillate between acting like a 10-, a 20-, and an 80-year-old. But no one ever puts a developmental or functional age on me! Why, then, do we do this to people with disabilities?

We have mistakenly assumed that treating a person as if he were his developmental age is a good thing. We may even believe, for example, that (1) a child could not be successful if he was educated in a classroom with others of the same chronological age or that (2) an adult could not do a certain type of job because of his developmental age. If you're concerned about a person with a disability "not being at age level," look carefully at his environment and how he's treated. Perhaps he's not "acting his age" because he's not being treated as the age he really is (and wants to be)! *Duh!*

Routinely, young children (with and without disabilities) are held back in kindergarten and the primary grades because it's believed they're "not ready" for one reason or another. But many are recognizing the dangers of this practice. Adults who were held back in school painfully reveal the years of stigma attached to being older than their peers in school. It can become a lifelong legacy of perceived failure that crushes a person's soul.

Furthermore, if we hold a six-year-old back in kindergarten or a special ed preschool, how will being with children who are a year or two years *younger* help him mature? That just doesn't make any sense! And why do we always "blame the child"? Maybe the *teacher* didn't do such a hot job! So why would we compel the child to spend another year with her?

> **Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you help them to become what they are capable of being.**
>
> *Johann von Goethe*

What can we do when someone isn't at the same "functional level" as her chronological age? In some cases, the answer is nothing! Again, children and adults who do *not* have disabilities routinely exhibit a mismatch in their chronological and developmental ages. The "cause" might be situational, environmental, or something else. Sometimes we just need to give people space and time to mature or learn. In other cases, we can provide accommodations, supports, and/or assistive technology devices to help the person master his environment and be who he really is.

When deciding to do nothing or something, let's again use our common sense. If a child, for example, is not quite as mature as his peers, so what? Give him time, *and* ensure he has the opportunities and experiences typical for his chronological age. If he's six, he needs to be surrounded by other six-year-olds so he'll learn how to *be* six. Keeping him with four-year-olds will only encourage him to remain like a four.

If, however, a six-year-old is thought to be like a two-year-old because he's not talking, he needs a communication device. If a student isn't reading "at grade level," she needs modified reading materials and/or opportunities to learn through methods other than reading.

If a teenager or young adult doesn't "behave" at an "age-appropriate" level, he needs to be with others of a similar age, in positive, supportive environments where he can learn "how to be" that age. People around him need to have high expectations for him, as well as patience. And he may also need behavior supports.

Let's dump the developmental (functional) age concept once and for all. Isn't it time to treat people with disabilities with the respect and dignity they deserve for the number of years they've lived on this Earth?