

The Value of Being a Skeptic

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

It's good to be a skeptic—to doubt and question. A skeptic ponders “why, who says, how do you know, what does that mean, where is it written” and more. A skeptic doesn't spontaneously trust; a skeptic doesn't automatically revere those “in authority.” A skeptic wonders.

There's value in skepticism, especially for folks involved in disability issues: people with disabilities, family members, service providers, educators, and others. We frequently believe (and behave) as if (1) a disability diagnosis tells us something very important about a person, and/or (2) that some regulation, policy, or method of doing things is the end-all-and-be-all—“This is The Way and the Only Way.”

There can be serious consequences to accepting everything—or most everything—we're told. The lives of individuals with disabilities and their family members are often *ruled by*—and can be *ruined by*—the hopelessness, the red tape, and/or the creation of more problems which may accompany the “expert's expertise”!

What if, for example, we doubt and question and examine the *prognosis* that goes with a diagnosis? What if we got a second opinion about the prognosis from someone else, such as a person who has the same diagnosis or people who know or work with successful people with that diagnosis?

I've always wondered what the diagnosing physician might have told me about my infant son's prognosis if he (the doctor) had actually *known* any successful adults who had cerebral palsy (CP). If, for example, “Dr. N” had attended college with a person who had CP and used a wheelchair, and was successful—how might his prognosis about my baby son been different? The reality was that

Dr. N didn't know *what was possible* for a person with CP (or many other conditions, I'd guess). All he told me about the possible long-term outcomes was based on what he learned in med school. And many of his professors had probably been trained during the institutional era! So what would *they* know about adults with developmental disabilities in today's world?

Healthy skepticism can prevent parents from falling into the abyss of grief—an unnecessary experience for parents that is also harmful to their children. (The dangers of this pit of darkness are examined in another article, “The Set-Up for Grief,” and a detailed exploration of a parent's “need to grieve” when a child is diagnosed with a disability is included in *Disability is Natural: Revolutionary Common Sense for Raising Successful Children with Disabilities*.)

Doubt is the beginning,
not the end, of wisdom.

George Isles

What if we also wonder about treatments and services? Educators, service providers, therapists, physicians, and others have been told by their superiors or professors, “This

is The Way . . .” In turn, they tell parents and people with disabilities, “This is The Way we do [early intervention, early childhood, special education, therapy, voc-rehab, or whatever].”

Parents and people with disabilities may accept all or most of what they're told about services and treatments because they have nothing with which to compare. And besides, the information they're receiving comes from “professionals” or “experts,” and most of us have been raised with good manners, which means we're supposed to “respect authority.”

Consider, however, that in many other endeavors, we ask questions, shop around, and compare

2 - The Value of Being a Skeptic

information before going forward: when buying a car, a house, or even a toaster; when planning a vacation; when looking at college options; and in many other situations. We want to make sure we have as much information as possible before we make a decision. *Shouldn't we do the same when it involves potentially life-altering decisions about a loved one with a disability or our families?*

When speaking about the need for inclusive environments, I've heard comments like, "But he *loves* living in the group home [or being in the special ed room or some other segregated setting]." Or worse, "We think the special ed room [or other segregated setting] is the best place for him." Further discussion, however, reveals that the person with a disability has not been consulted and/or has not been offered any other options.

If all you've ever been offered is vanilla ice cream, there's no doubt in your mind: vanilla is the best. You wouldn't question whether vanilla is good or not. You would not be skeptical.

But once you learned chocolate ice cream (or twenty-nine other flavors) existed, you might be skeptical that vanilla is the end-all-and-be-all of ice cream. And when you actually *tried* other flavors, you might decide vanilla is not your favorite, after all!

The same motivation that infects people with disabilities and family members—respect for authority—may also infect professionals. They, too, are expected (or mandated) to follow the directives from their superiors. If they want to keep their jobs, many must follow "The Rules."

While talking with parents, people with disabilities, and professionals over the years, I've noticed there are some who *do not* automatically accept the status quo. Their reaction, however, isn't usually healthy skepticism; it's anger. Parents,

especially, may turn into fighters and engage in war. (This tactic should be reserved as a last resort.) And professionals who don't readily embrace the party line may allow themselves to be metaphorically beaten into submission to The Rules or they may quit their jobs in frustration.

More favorable outcomes can be achieved by practicing healthy and respectful skepticism. But please don't confuse skepticism with cynicism or pessimism. Some people may be skeptics, cynics, *and* pessimists, all rolled into one. But you can be a skeptic *and* maintain a positive and enthusiastic outlook on the world.

As thoughtful and positive skeptics, we can ask questions: "why, who says, where is it written, how do you know, what if we tried this or that" and many more. Questions, asked respectfully and with genuine interest, can open the door to dialogue.

When we've asked enough questions and received answers, we're in a better position to make wiser, more informed choices:

whether to accept or reject—in whole or in part—the prognosis, method of treatment, services offered, or anything else about a person with a disability.

Furthermore, being openly skeptical and asking relevant questions—whether you're a person with a disability, a family member, or a professional—can ignite change. When we keep the lines of communication open, the warrior role, being beaten down, and/or giving up may no longer be the typical outcomes. Instead, constructive dialogue, which can result in positive change, will be the outcome.

After experiencing and then recovering from a serious illness, the writer Norman Cousins said, "Never deny the diagnosis, but do deny the negative prognosis that may go with it." We can expand on this principle as described in this article.

Try adding some healthy skepticism to the foundation of your operating principles. I think you'll be pleased with the results.

Skeptics are never deceived.

French Proverb