IF-Thinking

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

Many years ago, at my children's inclusive elementary school, I was asked to observe in a fifth-grade classroom, and to share my ideas on better strategies for Chris, a boy with autism.

Chris received intensive adult support: a teacher's aide usually sat right next to him. During a spelling test, Chris told her how to spell each word, and she wrote for him since his writing was illegible to everyone except Chris. But most of her efforts were to keep Chris in his seat. It was painful to watch as—every few minutes—Chris fidgeted and started to rise, and a gentle, but firm, hand on his shoulder kept him in his seat.

Long-story short: I ran to my son's first-grade classroom to borrow his laptop computer for Chris to try out. During the next two hours, Chris was captivated as he explored all the programs on the computer; he never once tried to get up; and when he discovered the word processing program, he found the letters on the keyboard to type his name, had an ah-ha look on his face, and said, "Mrs. Snow, if I had one of these [a computer] I could take spelling tests all by myself." Indeed he could—and he and I both laughed with glee!

Chris was so thoroughly engaged with the computer that he never felt the need to "escape." (Was this need born out of boredom and/or the desire to get away from a Hovering Helicopter Helper?) Chris had no previous access to a computer because his mom had said, "He could never do that." But I didn't know this; my action was a shot in the dark, generated by IF-Thinking. And Chris shared his own IF-Thinking with me.

What if we made an IF-List regarding the person with a disability we care about? What if we incorporated IF-Thinking in IEP/IHP/ISP meetings? We could make an IF-List about what we're currently doing (to examine those actions), and make a list of new things that might result in positive outcomes. Consider the following examples...

—IF I help Graciela too much, I may make her helpless.

—IF we choose more natural ways of helping our child, instead of traditional therapies, we can meet our child's needs, and our family can live a more normal life.

—IF Tom has many opportunities to practice driving, with appropriate adaptations, he may be able to drive.

—IF Amber is at her IEP meeting, and participates in writing relevant and meaningful goals for herself, she'll probably have a much better school year.

—IF we provide Joaquin with the supports he needs, he can successfully move into his own place.

—IF Nicole has a power wheelchair, she'll be more self-reliant, and able to enjoy age-appropriate activities, instead of being treated like a baby when she's pushed in the manual wheelchair.

—IF Medicaid/insurance won't fund the assistive technology device we need, we'll look at other options (volunteer agencies, getting a used device, etc.).

—IF Dylan has a communication device, he can speak for himself, and won't need to communicate through his behavior (so maybe some of the "inappropriate behavior" will disappear), and he can also tell his mom and dad, "I love you," for the first time ever.

—IF we provide a one-on-one aide for Latoya, we'll be sending the message that she's incompetent (to her and to others). This could worsen her behavior, and also prevent others from helping. What IF assistive technology devices and natural peer support could eliminate or minimize the need for one-on-one support?

—IF Jeremy is in special, segregated settings, he won't learn how to get along in the real world.

—IF we focus on Sandra's abilities, instead of trying to "fix her problems," we'll bring out the best in her.

—IF we really listen to Stephen, and are guided by his wants and needs, we'll be on the right track.

IF-Thinking can take us beyond the status quo to new possibilities and better outcomes. But this can happen only *if* we choose to take the time and make the effort to consider . . . IF!