

# “Girls Don’t Play Drums”

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

In 1960, I was a too-tall and too-gangly 10-year-old girl—and tomboy—in the fifth grade. Because I was the tallest of *all* the fifth-graders, I was chosen to play Tom Sawyer in the school play. There was nothing to be done about my being taller than all my classmates in real life, but the teacher apparently felt it was *not* okay for a girl to be taller than the boys in the play—heaven forbid! Since I was a ham (*and* a tomboy) portraying a male was okay with me.

But something even greater was awaiting fifth-graders: being in the school band! At the first band meeting, most of us fairly salivated at the sight of the bright and shiny instruments; we couldn’t wait to get our grimy hands on them and make our mark in the musical world. And there was no doubt what I drooled over: the drum set!

Mr. Smith, the larger-than-life band director, kept our rowdy bunch in line as he spoke briefly to each student, deciding who would play what. When my turn came, I blurted out my desire as I pictured myself holding the sticks, banging away on the snare drum and the high hat.

But my reverie was shattered by Mr. Smith’s directive: “Girls don’t play drums.” His words, tone of voice, and body language left no doubt: this was not negotiable. Nevertheless, I asked “Why not?” Did he think I wasn’t strong enough? I wasn’t asking to hoist the heavy tuba—how much could a set of drumsticks weigh? Was it not “lady-like” to play the drums? (But I was Tom Sawyer!) “*They just don’t,*” he said. “You’ll play the saxophone.”

So the saxophone (sex-a-phone some of us snickered) it was. I learned to wet the reed and finger the keys and played with determination, while my heart pined for the sticks, drums, and high hat.

I never did understand Mr. Smith’s decision. Was it based on a logical reason, on 1960’s customs, or on his belief that it was inappropriate for a girl to play drums? Would he have said that boys couldn’t play the flute (“too girlish”)? Yet another teacher thought it was okay for a girl to portray a boy in the school play. I-Didn’t-Get-It-Then-and-Still-Don’t. In another time, at other schools, band directors *did* allow girls to play drums, and some of those young ladies went on to earn a living from their talent!

Our attitudes and beliefs drive our actions and can have a profound impact—positive or negative—on another’s life. How many times a day do we behave like Mr. Smith: Knee-Jerk Reaction—Because I Said So—Those Are the Rules—That’s Just the Way It Is—etc., etc., etc.? (Add your own to this list.)

When we behave this way, how many dreams are crushed, what opportunities are lost, what harm have we caused? Equally important, these reactions—or inactions, like maintaining the status quo—can also negatively impact one’s “organization” (e.g., family, school, workplace, etc.) by stifling

new ideas, inhibiting positive change, and more.

If we want better outcomes for people with disabilities, families, schools, and organizations, let’s be more skeptical about our “rules.” Let’s challenge conventional wisdom and question treasured traditions. Let’s explore possibilities and ask, “Why not?” When we do, what dreams will be realized? What talents and abilities will be revealed? What hopes will be fulfilled? What powers will be unleashed?

Girls *can* play drums. And the better outcomes we want *can* be achieved with a change in attitudes and actions. It’s time to march to the beat of a different drum.

**The indispensable new skill that organizations need to build is a way to institutionalize skeptical thinking, challenges to orthodoxy, and the questioning of fundamental premises.**

*Matt Miller*