

An old proverb says, “Curiosity killed the cat.” But we might do well to adopt a wiser adage from memory expert Harry Lorayne: “Curiosity killed the cat, but where human beings are concerned, the only thing a healthy curiosity can kill is ignorance.”

What might happen if we were more curious about children and adults with disabilities? Could we learn more, become wiser, and understand their perspectives—and be less ignorant? In turn, would we be more effective in assisting people with disabilities to live the lives of their dreams?

Being curious means we would ask children and/or adults with disabilities about what they want and need, how they feel about things in their lives, and much more. Then, hopefully, what we learn would lead to actions and solutions. Asking a person with a disability would also confer respect and parity: we want to know what the person thinks because we value the person and her feelings, experiences, and perspectives.

It seems, however, that many of us are not curious enough to seek the opinions of people with disabilities. Is it because we’re not curious about anything? Or is it because we don’t value the wisdom and opinions of people with disabilities? Or maybe we don’t want to hear what they have to say because their answers might not be the ones we want to hear?

Not being curious—not attempting to learn—is bad enough for us: we remain ignorant. But it’s especially harmful for children and adults with disabilities when we send the unspoken message that we do not value their opinions—*they are not worthy of our curiosity* because we “know better.” Under these circumstances, is it any wonder that many people with disabilities learn to be helpless and dependent? Sadly, they’ve learned—by our indifference—that their thoughts, ideas, opinions, or feelings are irrelevant.

This problem starts in early childhood and may continue throughout a person’s life, with devastating

# Let’s Get Curious!

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

results. For example, how many parents of young children with disabilities ask those children, “What do you want to do when you grow up,” like they ask their other children? How many parents and teachers talk to students with disabilities about career goals and/or post-secondary

education? How many employment specialists ask an adult with a disability, “What’s your dream job?”

Our lack of interest causes many children to believe their parents and teachers have no dreams for them, so they don’t dream for themselves. And once these children become adults, many of them believe, “I don’t need to work; I get SSI...”

Those exact words were spoken to me by a young man in his early 20s who had learning disabilities. I asked if would like to have more than the \$600 or so he received monthly from SSI. “What do you mean,” he asked. I gave a brief explanation of how people are paid a certain amount in a job, then when they get better at the job, they earn more money, and how people often decide to get a new job in order to make more money, and so on. His jaw

dropped, he stared at me, and I could see the wheels turning in his head, and he finally said, “Yeah, that’s what I want—I want more than SSI—but no one ever told me this before...” Then *my* jaw dropped, while my brain exploded with questions: why didn’t his parents or teachers ever ask this young man about what he wanted to do with his life? How could they do that to him? I kept my questions to myself and encouraged him to think about what type of job he might want, and shared some ideas about networking and other strategies that could help him move into the workforce.

The solution to this dilemma? Let’s get curious—let’s ask people with disabilities what they think, how they feel, and more. Then let’s do something good with the information! And while the examples shared above focused on employment, we can best serve the interests of the children and adults with disabilities if

**Curiosity is the wick  
in the candle of learning.**  
*William A. Ward*

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the scope of our curiosity is as wide as possible, which can lead to a variety of new and different opportunities and positive changes!

We can ask children things like:

- Do you like going to therapy? What do *you* want to learn to do? Would you like to try to learn those things at dance, karate, or in other places/ways? Do you want to keep trying to walk (or talk or whatever) with help from the therapists, or would you rather have a power wheelchair (or a communication device or other supports)?
- Do you like going to the special ed preschool or would you rather stay home with mom/dad and/or go to the same preschool as your brother/sister?
- How do you feel about being in the special ed classroom and/or being pulled out of general ed classrooms for special help? How can we/teachers best help you learn? Do you want to stay in the high school until you're 22 or are you ready to move on when you're 18, like other kids? What kind of job do you want when you're grown up? Where/how do you want to live when you leave home? What do you need to learn so you can lead the kind of life you want?
- Do you want to learn how to babysit, mow lawns, or find some other way to earn some spending money? Would you like to have an allowance? How would you like to help around the house? Are you interested in painting your room a different color? Want to learn how to cook your favorite meal? How can we help you learn to use the phone and do other things so you can speak for yourself? Would you like to join a Scout troop, play on a Park and Rec team, or volunteer in the community? Want to learn a new hobby or go to the library/museum/zoo? What would you like to do/where do you want to go on a vacation?

We can ask adults similar questions, as well as:

- Are you happy in the sheltered workshop or day program? What would you rather be doing? What's

your dream job? Do you like living in the group home or with your parents? Where would you like to live and with whom? What kind of supports do you think you need, and how can we help you learn what *you* want to learn so you can lead the life you want—at home and on the job?

- What do you want to do for fun (*besides bowling*)? Do you enjoy going to the mall if you don't have any money to spend, or would you rather do something else? Are you interested in joining a hobby club?

These are but a few things we can be curious about and ask questions to learn more. We're limited only by our own attitudinal barriers!

Some might argue that these types of questions are somehow inappropriate. For example, a parent might say she would not give her child the opportunity to decide whether he should receive therapy or not. A service provider might feel it's not "realistic" to talk to a person with a disability about living somewhere other than a group home. But shouldn't we *care* how people with disabilities feel? Shouldn't

we explore every alternative and new possibilities? *What would you want if it were you?*

The *way* we ask our questions is vitally important. If, for example, a mother asked, "You *do* like going to therapy, don't you," she'll probably get the answer she was hoping

for! In all likelihood, her child will answer "yes" in order to make his mom happy! So we need to ask our questions (to include the words we use, tone of voice, and body language) *without a hidden agenda*, and with the most honest and honorable intentions. We can even say, "I'm asking because I'm interested and I want to know what you think/feel—and any answer you give is okay."

Being interested in another's thoughts, ideas, and feelings is one way to show you care—that you value and respect the person. To one degree or another, all of us—including people with disabilities—need to feel that someone cares and is interested enough to ask. So let's get curious!

**We keep moving forward,  
opening new doors, and doing  
new things, because we're  
curious and curiosity keeps  
leading us down new paths.**

*Walt Disney*