## ABILITY TO CHOOSE + HELPFUL TOOLS = SUCCESS!

## Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, <u>www.disabilityisnatural.com</u> O O

On one of our family's many excursions to the movie theater, I witnessed an event that's all too common. And it illustrated the dire experiences of many individuals with disabilities who are unsuccessful simply because they don't have the ability to choose and the tools they need for success.

We went to see *Pirates of the Caribbean* and enjoyed ourselves immensely. For many years, our son, Benjamin, wanted to be taken out of his wheelchair so he could sit in a theater seat. At 16, however, he decided he wanted to stay in his wheelchair, so we took our places in the front of the theater where wheelchair access is provided.

Minutes before the feature started in the already-darkened theater, a woman pushing a stroller entered, accompanied by several other people. She was Ms. Bossy—barking instructions—as she led the group to the other side of the wheelchair accessible seating and parked the stroller. However, the person in the stroller wasn't a child. He appeared to be a 20-something young man with cerebral palsy (the same condition as my son). In addition to the Man in the Stroller—it's hard for me to even write those words—there was a teenage boy who signed and two other adults who appeared to have disabilities. It seemed that Ms. Bossy was probably a foster parent or an official "caretaker" of the group, and this was probably a "community outing."

After Ms. Bossy got everyone situated (*without* any popcorn, candy, or drinks), the Man in the Stroller began grunting loudly and often. Others in the theater—*and Ms. Bossy*—may have assumed the worst (that the sounds were nonsense), but I assumed he was probably excited about being at the movies (like we were)! It was hard to know

*exactly* what he was feeling, however, since his speech was hard to understand and he didn't have a communication device. Every time he grunted—expressing himself—Ms. Bossy tried to silence him with, "Chill! *Chill*!" Her efforts had little effect. Numerous grunts were followed by an even more menacing, "I said *chill*!" I began to wonder if one or more of the man's grunts could have meant, "Where's the popcorn?" or "When will the movie start?" or even, "Why don't *you* chill?"

It was painful to watch and listen to what was happening fifteen feet from us. It was hard to imagine what the Man in the Stroller—and the other people—felt, being treated like that.

Once the movie started, the Man in the Stroller did what everyone else did: became quiet and watched intently, and he seemed to enjoy the antics and actions of Johnny Depp, Orlando Bloom, and the other pirates.

I planned to exchange greetings with the group after the movie, but the instant the film ended, Ms. Bossy quickly herded her charges out. Then Benjamin asked me about the group—specifically, why the *man* was in a *stroller*, and why he didn't have a power wheelchair *and* a communication device. Why, indeed?

But, first, a pause: when we wonder why so many people with disabilities are isolated in the segregated settings of group homes, sheltered work/day programs, special ed rooms, and other places of exclusion, we can do the *"Duh!"* exercise (strike forehead with heel of the hand) and exclaim, "Because they don't have the tools they need for success!"

## 2 - Ability to Choose + Helpful Tools = Success!

There's little doubt that if the Man in the Stroller had a power wheelchair and a communication device (or some form of effective communication), he would not have been in a movie theater with Ms. Bossy yelling, "Chill!" Instead, he might have had a real job, a real home, and real friends. (And if someone *did* tell him to "Chill," he could tell 'em off, turn on his wheels, and leave!)

I could not answer my son's questions about why the Man in the Stroller didn't have the assistive technology devices he needed. I could only guess. And one guess was that someone (or several someones) did not believe the man had the ability to drive a power chair or use a communication device—maybe no one cared enough *to even let him try*. Alternatively, perhaps he *could* use either or both of those devices, but he didn't get approval from Medicaid, and no one went to bat for him.

Did the man *choose* to be pushed in a stroller instead of using a power wheelchair? Did he *choose* to have no effective method to communicate? Did he *choose* to spend

time with a woman who tried to keep him quiet with numerous commands to "Chill"? I don't think so. And did *he* choose to see *Pirates of the Caribbean*, or would he have preferred *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* or some other film that day?

We could ask similar questions about children who may need assistive technology devices. If given a choice, would a child *choose* to be pushed in a manual wheelchair (at the convenience of the pusher) or would she choose to drive a power chair so she can go when/where she wants? Would she choose to be in a segregated classroom, where functional life skills are considered more important than academics, or would she choose to be in a general ed class with educators who had high expectations for her, where she could make friends, and be a Real Kid?

Liberty consists in the ability to choose. Simone Weil

Would people *without* disabilities succeed without the tools *they* need for success? Would *they* be employed if they didn't have effective transportation to/from work and other places, as well as things like computers, telephones, and other tools at their fingertips? Without these tools, success would be a dream that is always out of reach. It's no different for children and adults with disabilities. Moreover, if you're a person *without* a disability, would you allow others to have power over you—*power to deny your basic right to make choices about your own life*?

Many children remain in segregated special ed rooms because they don't have mobility, communication, a way to produce written communication, and more. But with tools—power wheelchairs, communication devices, computers, or whatever they need—they could. Many adults remain unemployed (and hidden away in sheltered environments) for the same reasons. But let's get even

> more basic: people with disabilities are routinely denied freedom of speech and the freedom of independent mobility. They don't have the equipment that would enable them to make the same kind of

choices which most of us take for granted. How can we allow this to happen? Freedom of speech is one of the cornerstones of basic human rights and democracy, as well as being the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

We shouldn't blame individuals with disabilities for their lack of success until we examine our own actions (or *inactions*). Our lack of vision and half-hearted commitment has ensured that many people with disabilities remain in the margins of society—demeaned, dependent, and without choice. But we can do better! When we ensure the children and adults with disabilities in our lives have the tools they need so they can make their own choices, we'll also ensure they'll enjoy the success they so richly deserve!

Copyright 2003-16 Kathie Snow, All Rights Reserved. You may print and/or make copies of this article to use as a handout (noncommercial use). Before using this article in any other way (on websites, blogs, newsletters, etc.) and to comply with copyright law, see the Terms of Use at <u>www.disabilityisnatural.com</u>. While you're there, sign up for the free Disability is Natural E-newsletter!