

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?

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!

Liberty consists in the ability to choose.

Simone Weil