

Treatment

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

Can we count the types of treatments offered to children and adults with disabilities? We can start with physical, occupational, and speech therapies, as well as behavior, art, music, water, horticulture, recreation, conductive, constraint, aversive, and other therapeutic services. We could add other “remedies,” such as daily living and/or life-skills training; orthotics/prosthetics; psychological and psychiatric regimens; early intervention; behavior management; vocational training; special education; social-skills training; and many more. The list seems to be endless!

But what about *the way people are treated* while they’re receiving treatments, instruction, and/or other assistance? All of the “treatments” in the world are of little value if the person receiving the treatment is also *being treated unkindly*.

While many people working in the field are usually kind, there are, unfortunately, too many instances of people in “caring” positions who behave in uncaring ways. I’ve experienced it in our own family’s life; I’ve seen it during visits to places populated by people with disabilities; and I hear stories from people with disabilities and families. This article represents the concerns that many feel about this issue.

When my son, Benjamin, was very young, he received a variety of pediatric therapies. If he started to cry, I stepped in to comfort him, and asked the therapist to stop, and to do something else. I was amazed by the collective response of the therapists: that it’s okay if a child cries during therapy, that children with disabilities are very manipulative, and that their crying was a way to “get out” of doing therapy. I’m not sure if they learned these philosophies in their professional training, if they saw children as objects to be manipulated (who’s manipulating whom?), or if they had no common sense and no compassion.

I shared my belief that my son was not learning anything useful when he was upset, regardless of the reason for his tears. Sadly, the therapists didn’t agree.

Even sadder, some parents didn’t agree, either. Moms and dads know that a child may cry because he’s fearful, tired, hungry, thirsty, wet, uncomfortable, in pain, or anything else. What does he learn when his cries are ignored? Worse, what does he learn if he’s being hurt (physically or emotionally) and no one, especially his mom or dad, protects him?

Consider other true-life stories. In a day program, a staff person is pushing a man with cerebral palsy in his manual wheelchair. The man turns his head toward the pusher and emphatically tries to tell her something. His words are hard to understand; he

waves his arms in distress. The woman pays no attention to his pleas.

A child with a disability sits in the corner of a school classroom doing nothing, for long periods of time, every school day, ignored by the three adults in the classroom.

A teacher has a preschooler with a disability sitting on her lap; the teacher holds the little girl’s hands in hers, trying to get the girl to catch and throw a ball. The little girl cries and screams and tries to pull her hands away; the teacher ignores her, and holds her hands even tighter. The school principal, observing this, says and does nothing.

A staff member in a residential facility eats a cookie while standing by a man with a disability. She offers a cookie to a co-worker, and they happily mmm-mmm-good their cookies. The man says he’d like one, too. When he’s told no, he stomps his foot and briefly yells in anger. He’s chastised, and one worker details the incident in her log. A supervisor with common sense asks the workers why, if they knew the man shouldn’t have a cookie because of dietary issues, they ate cookies in front of him? *Duh!*

It’s been reported that people with disabilities are abused at double the rate of abuse in the general population. Perhaps we should wonder if small uncaring acts might lead to larger abuses?

**In my early professional years
I was asking the question:
How can I treat, or cure, or
change this person?**

**Now I would phrase the
question in this way: How can
I provide a relationship which
this person may use for his
own personal growth?**

Carl Rogers

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No one is perfect; any of us may be guilty of being frustrated, losing our tempers, and doing things we immediately regret. And if we choose to be unkind to the grocery store clerk or a telemarketer, we probably haven't caused permanent harm to the person.

But the same may not be true for children and adults with disabilities who spend the majority of their time in “special” places, surrounded by people in “caring” positions, where uncaring treatment—over and over again—can result in great harm. In addition, children or adults with disabilities may not respond to uncaring treatment—to defend their autonomy and dignity—out of a justifiable fear that further mistreatment will follow. And what about those who are *unable* to communicate what's happening to them at the hands of others?

However, *some* children and adults with disabilities *do* speak up (like the man in the cookie situation), and good for them! But what's the outcome? There's usually no acknowledgement, remorse, or apology from the offender. No, the person receiving treatment may be punished, labeled as “non-compliant,” and be more restricted in her autonomy and freedom.

A few situations have been described here, but you're probably aware of others. Let's think about outcomes. The student with a disability who is ignored in the classroom is being treated unkindly, but the bigger issues include, among other things, that he's learning he's not a valuable human being, and he's receiving a sub-standard education. Use your imagination and experiences to consider possible outcomes of similar situations.

We know the solution: treat others the way you want to be treated. Would you want *your child* to be ignored by her teachers? Would it be okay if people made your child cry, or didn't comfort your tearful child? What if others treated you the way people treated the man in the cookie situation?

Consider a couple of other things. Some people who work in the field seem to think their jobs are about power and control. Workers need to recognize instead that children and/or adults with disabilities are, in essence, their *employers*—they wouldn't have jobs without them. Some rethinking may be in order.

The fundamental value in relations among people is to respect the dignity and the individuality of fellow men, to treat them not as objects to be manipulated for our purposes or in accordance with our values but as persons, with their own rights and their own values—as persons to be persuaded, not coerced, not forced, not bulldozed, not brainwashed.

Milton Friedman

Also, it's been my experience that many people with disabilities have sophisticated “radar:” they can read body language, tone of voice, and other non-verbal communication better than others. So kind words that are accompanied by an unkind tone of voice or body language are accurately perceived as deceptive. No positive relationship is possible under those circumstances.

In his book, *Hello Goodbye Hello: A Circle of 101 Remarkable Meetings*, author Craig Brown details the memories of the young Helen Keller after becoming friends with the older Mark Twain. Ms. Keller said, “He never made me feel that my opinions were worthless, as so many people do. He knew that we do not think with eyes and ears, and that our capacity for thought is not measured by five senses. He kept me always in mind while he talked, and he treated me like a competent human being. That is why I loved him.” Can we learn from this?

Let's talk with each other about how we treat children and adults with disabilities. Discuss it at meetings. As the saying goes, “Practice random acts of kindness.” Make kindness a habit, even when you don't feel like it, and even if you think the other person doesn't “deserve” it. Kindness begets kindness. And if you see someone behaving unkindly, say something, (in a kindly way, of course)!

Leo Buscaglia says it beautifully: “Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.” That power is in all of us; let's use it, starting right now.