

# A Culture of Caring

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

Many children and adults with disabilities are surrounded by people in “caring” positions—family members, service providers, therapists, educators, and others—who may label themselves as “caregivers.” We may believe we demonstrate caring by providing help: personal assistance, teaching, treatments and services, etc.

Unfortunately, it seems we may simultaneously be oblivious to the *feelings* of the person we care for. What if some “care” might actually cause harm?

For example, do we care how a child feels about being taken to therapy throughout his childhood? Do we care if the child hears the unintended and unspoken message of therapy: “You are not okay the way you are...”?

Do we care how a child feels about being held back in school? Do we think the child is not aware of the perception that he’s a failure?

Do we care how a child feels about being in a special ed classroom or being pulled out of class for special services? Are we aware the child may feel she’s “not good enough”?

Do we care how adults and/or children feel about having a “one-on-one” (para, aide, “guard,” etc.)? Are they not at risk of feeling incompetent and worse?

Do we care how an adult feels about being prevented from making his own decisions, living where he wants to live, having the job he wants, and other ordinary adult experiences?

Do we care how people feel when their hopes and dreams are ignored? Or when they’re denied the assistive technology (power wheelchairs, communication devices, etc.) they need to live the lives *they* want? Do we wonder if “inappropriate behavior” may be a person’s reaction to how she’s being treated?

To care for another person, I must be able to understand him and his world as if I were inside it...to see, as it were, with his eyes what his world is like to him and how he sees himself. Instead of merely looking at him in a detached way from outside, as if he were a specimen, I must be able to...sense from “inside” what life is like for him, what he is striving to be, and what he requires to grow.

Milton Mayeroff, *On Caring*

At my children’s inclusive elementary school in the early 1990s, the extraordinary principal initiated “a culture of caring.” He believed children would be more successful if they felt cared about at school—if they felt they belonged, felt valued and competent, and more. Many positive changes emerged, and the

principal noted that within a culture of caring, it was impossible to *not* have an inclusive school where *all* students were educated in general ed classrooms.

It seems we mistakenly “care” more about the *outside* of a person—the disability or diagnosis—via treatments and services. But as Milton Mayeroff describes (see box), real caring grows from our understanding of the *inside* of a person. This is what happened at my children’s school, with phenomenal results. Caring about a child’s insides

significantly impacted the child’s outside (the so-called “problems” of the disability). Most, if not all, “inappropriate behaviors” disappeared. The impact of the disability was minimized when assistive technology, modifications, and/or supports were provided. When children *felt* successful, they *demonstrated* greater success in all areas (social, academic, etc.). And there was much more...

*What* do we truly care about—the disability or the person? And *how* do we care? Let’s choose to create a culture of pervasive caring in our homes, schools, agencies, and other places. Caring about a person’s feelings—really caring by working from the inside—can generate greater life-changing outcomes than all the traditional ways of “caring” combined!

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