

# Benchmarks

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

When my son, Benjamin, was a kindergartner at our inclusive neighborhood school, my husband, Mark, and I were excited to visit the kindergarten class during Parents' Night. Twenty-five pictures of cows were displayed on the walls—all looking pretty much the same—so parents had to get close to find their child's name on the paper. Mark and I, however, spotted Benjamin's picture from 30 feet away; it was a Picasso-type cow. Benjamin *said* it was a cow and we believed him—and we loved his cow!

The teacher approached us and said she was sorry that Benjamin's picture "didn't look like the other children's pictures." What she really meant, it seemed, was that our son's cow didn't look "as good" as the others. (Did I mention that Benjamin has cerebral palsy?) We didn't let her words diminish our joy in Benjamin's accomplishment, but I *did* feel obliged to educate her. I responded: "Please don't compare Benjamin to others, because if you do, you'll always be disappointed—he'll never 'measure up' in your eyes. Also, you'll be so focused on what he's *not* doing that you won't see what he *is* doing. Please compare Benjamin only to himself: what he's doing today that he didn't do six days or six weeks or six months ago, then you'll see how he's learning and growing."

I cannot imagine how I might feel about myself if I was measured against others. How would I see myself—how would others see me—if I were compared to other mothers? Other wives? Other housekeepers? Other writers? Other public speakers?

By what benchmarks would I be judged? Who would set the standards? What would I do with such information? Give up? Fight back? Seek professional help? Am I of less value because I don't meet the standards of others? Back to my son, what *are* the standards for a kindergartner's drawing of a cow, and would Picasso have seen a different image than

the kindergarten teacher did? Can we recognize the *subjectiveness* of most benchmarks?

Fortunately, I'm in no danger of being measured (and then judged); nor are most people who are reading this right now. If we were, we'd probably throw a fit over the unfairness of it all, and our experiences would probably cause us to do things differently regarding people with disabilities who *are* routinely measured. But we really don't need to have such experiences in order to make positive changes, do we?

Some might argue in favor of the value of comparisons: we think knowing a person's so-called deficits or weaknesses, as compared to a norm, should determine what goals should be targeted. But have we questioned if this goal or that is *relevant and meaningful* to the person? Are we going to work and work and work trying to get a person to do something he or she may never be able to do? And while we're spending time on that, what are we *not* spending time on? Would it be better to provide assistive technology, supports, and/or modifications instead? What else should be considered? (Lots more!) And, yes, qualifying for services may be dependent on a person's "deviations" from the norm. If so, use such information for eligibility, but find ways to move beyond it once eligibility is established.

The only fair benchmarks are the ones established by, and important to, the individual. The only fair comparison is to one's self. Thus, a person is "here" ("current level of achievement" or whatever), with no comparison to others or a norm. We measure progress by what the person is doing today, as compared to what *she* was doing six days, six weeks, or six months ago, with no comparison to others or a norm. We ensure we're focused on what the person *can* do and wants to do, not on what the person cannot do. Isn't this common sense? Isn't it the right thing to do?