

No one is independent. Every person—from a newborn baby, to a U.S. President, and anyone else—is dependent on others, in one way or another. *We are all interdependent!*

Yet in the disability arena, many worship at the altar of “independence.” A variety of disability organizations, special educators, families, and others have the goal of “helping people with disabilities achieve their highest level of independence.”

What does this statement mean? Independence in what form? Financial, physical, decision-making, or what? What if children or adults with disabilities have a different definition than those who promote this goal? What does “highest level” mean, and who defines it? How could the goal be achieved if there’s no consensus on what the words mean? This—an understanding of terminology—is one issue.

Another issue is arrogance. Those who push others to become independent are, themselves, not independent. Yet they presume to be, while presuming people with disabilities are not.

My son, Benjamin, was born with cerebral palsy. During physical therapy sessions when he was six, the therapist repeatedly cajoled, “Come on, Benjamin, don’t you want to be independent?” Later that year, Benj resigned from his “therapy career,” and we found other ways to help him do what he wanted to do. One day while helping him, I lapsed into “therapy-speak,” saying, “This will help you be independent...” He turned to me and yelled, “I hate that word—please don’t ever say it again!” And I never did.

It *does* reflect arrogance to imply or judge that another is not independent. If we’re honest, perhaps we’ll admit that what we’re really saying is, “You should be normal.” (And what does *that* mean?)

Shouldn’t we discuss what independence means? If we do, it’s likely that a consensus on meaning could *not* be achieved, and the word would be discarded

Interdependence

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow

www.disabilityisnatural.com

Interdependence is a higher value than independence.

Stephen Covey

as *unusable*. Then, hopefully, we would choose to embrace interdependence.

What does interdependence look

like? Think about your own life. You’re probably dependent on family members for a variety of things, as well as co-workers, your auto mechanic, your bank, and other “providers of services.” You’re probably also dependent on assistive technology: your cell phone, computer, microwave oven, and more. Simultaneously, *others are dependent on you*. We’re all interdependent. And if you’re employed in the disability field, you’re dependent on children and/or adults with disabilities for your job!

If we choose to value interdependence, we can move beyond some of the concepts tied to independence, like walking, talking, cooking, and other functional skills. Instead, we’ll recognize the importance of relationships, reciprocity, inclusion in all areas, and other elements of an ordinary life. So many people with disabilities are lonely and isolated from the mainstream—connected only to family members and/or paid staff—and *are not given opportunities to experience interdependence*.

In the big scheme of things, what’s really important? Pencil-writing, walking, bed-making, etc., or knowing how to be a friend, having opportunities to connect with—and help—others in ordinary activities, learning how to find the help you need from a variety of sources, and so on. And, yes, let’s ensure the child or adult with a disability has whatever assistive technology, supports, and/or accommodations are needed to do these things.

There are only so many hours in the day; let’s use our time wisely and focus on what’s really important. There are only so many years in a person’s life; let’s not hold people with disabilities hostage to the undefinable “independence” goal. Let’s do what it takes to ensure they’re living wonderful, ordinary, and interdependent lives—right now!