

# THE DISABILITY DOUBLE STANDARD

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow

A few weeks ago, a neighbor (“Janet”) called, inquiring if my daughter, Emily, could babysit her children. Before putting my daughter on the phone, Janet and I chatted about what was going on in our lives. (As a side note, Janet is a substitute teacher, her husband has his own business, they’re both well-educated, and they recently remodeled their home with the latest in home appliances.) As we talked, Janet began complaining about her oldest son, Robert, a sixth grader. “Oh, he is so lazy and he’s always trying to take the easy way out!”

“I don’t understand—what do you mean he’s ‘lazy’ and ‘takes the easy way out’?” I asked.

“Well I’ll tell you!” she huffed. “The other day in his band class, he wanted to switch from the saxophone to drums because he thought drums would be easier! See what I mean? He just always wants things to be easy! I told him, ‘No way, Buster! You’re sticking it out with the sax!’”

Her comments weren’t out of the ordinary. I’ve heard many parents say similar things about their children, and at one time, I shared a similar attitude. But my work in the disability field, combined with being the parent of two teenagers, one of whom has been labeled with a disability, has given me a different perspective. So I shared my thoughts with my frustrated neighbor.

*Kathie:* Janet, do you have a dishwasher?

*Janet:* Of course!

*Kathie:* What about a microwave oven, computer, cell phone, washing machine, and dryer?

*Janet:* Yes, you know I do!

*Kathie:* Why do you use those, Janet? Isn’t it to make life easier?

*Janet:* Well, yes, I guess so.

*Kathie:* So why is it okay for grown-ups to decide to do things or use things that make our lives easier, but it’s not okay for our children to do the same thing?

At that, she sputtered and hemmed and hawed, and then began to rethink her accusation that her son was “lazy” and always wanted to “take the easy way out.” Oh, if changing attitudes in Disability World was this simple!

Across the country, children and adults with disabilities in all environments—in their homes, in schools, at work, and in other places—are in the same boat as Robert: they are held to a higher standard than those who impose the standard.

Children with disabilities, for example, are forced to spend countless hours trying to learn to write with a pencil. Yet their teachers (and most everyone else) routinely use computers instead of pencil and paper! In this era of computers, Palm Pilots, voice-to-text software, and other technology, handwriting is a skill of questionable value (unless one intends to be a calligrapher). And the hours spent on handwriting significantly reduces the time a child can spend on more meaningful and relevant academic pursuits.

Other students with disabilities are excluded from age-appropriate regular education classes because they can’t do math calculations with pencil and paper. Yet when their teachers (and most everyone else) balance their checkbooks at home, they use calculators or computer accounting software.

Still other students are labeled as “slow” or even as “failures” because they can’t read at grade level. But their teachers, as well as high-powered business people and others, make frequent use of audiobooks, videos, and computer programs to learn what they need or want to know.

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Adults with disabilities, especially those in congregate living situations, are expected to meet habilitation “goals” that may include such tasks as “washing the dishes within 20 minutes of eating” or “making up the bed within 30 minutes of getting up.” Yet the staff people who write these goals for others admit they don’t follow these “rules” in their own lives.

These examples are the tip of the iceberg of the Disability Double Standard. I’m sure you can think of many more.

Looking at Janet and Robert again, we realize that this Double Standard doesn’t apply only to individuals with disabilities. It occurs in many environments, to all types of people, when one person assumes a moral superiority over another. And it seems this trait is a generational “inheritance,” in that we learn it from our parents and other adults when we’re children, then we pass it on once we become adults. Ultimately, it represents a maxim we’re all familiar with: “Do as I say, not as I do.”

Like many children, Robert will learn to disregard the words of his mother. He will, instead, learn more from her actions (as reflected by another well-known maxim: “Actions speak louder than words.”). He was, in fact, following in his mother’s footsteps: his desire to switch to an easier instrument was no different than his mother choosing to use a dishwasher instead of washing and drying dishes by hand. In Robert’s case, the harm of his mother’s “Do as I say, not as I do” position was probably minimal.

The harm to individuals with disabilities, however, is far greater. Because many children and adults are perpetually under the control or influence of cradle-to-grave services (early intervention, early childhood, special education, vocational-rehabilitation, group homes, therapies, and more) there is no escape from others determining the standards which must be met.

(At some point, however, Robert will be in a position to determine his own standards. The same may not be true for many individuals with disability labels.) Moreover, those who do not comply with the “Do as I say, not as I do,” Disability Double Standard (which may be manifested as “goals,” “behavior plans,” and the like) are at risk for a variety of consequences which may include: increased pressure to comply, additional “goals” to remedy the non-compliance, the continuation or increase of segregation/isolation, and even punishment or abuse.

The solution to this harmful practice seems quite simple to me. It’s exemplified by another maxim we’re all familiar with: “Treat others the way you want to be treated.”

Shouldn’t people in the human services system (including special education) be held to the highest standard of humane practices? Is it time to place an embroidered wallhanging of “Treat others the way you want to be treated,” in the office of each and every “helping professional”?

Many may feel the solution lies in changing the rules and regulations of the system. And there’s no doubt that many rules and regs should be changed. But there are, in pockets here and there across the country, human service staffers, therapists, educators, and others who—under today’s rules and regulations—ensure children and adults with disabilities (1) are included and supported in typical environments with people who don’t have disabilities, (2) live self-directed lives full of choice and opportunities, and (3) attain personal goals that are relevant and meaningful to them.

These individuals do not impose the Disability Double Standard on others. And no “Treat others as you want to be treated” motto adorns their walls—instead, it’s written on their hearts.

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