

What do you say when . . . ?

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow

Children and adults with disability diagnoses, along with their family members or friends, frequently encounter curious questions, stares and pointed fingers, and/or downright rude comments from strangers. My unofficial survey reveals that our *responses* to these situations vary according to what state we're in at the time (happy, rushed, exhausted, or other) and how much time we have at the moment!

While some of us have more experience responding to uninvited queries, few of us seldom walk away from such an experience with our emotions unscathed. Many parents learn early on to create a "stock answer" they can whip out without thinking. Still, we often wish we had been able to come up with a snappy retort. I've got some solutions!

First, however, know that—if you feel like it—it's all right to try to educate the curious (nosey?) about people with disabilities. When doing so, however, make sure to focus on the disability condition in general, and stay away from focusing on your child or your friend who has the disability. There's nothing worse than talking about a person in front of him or her!

Second, it's equally important to realize that you *do not owe anyone an explanation*. The following story (which I use during presentations on People First Language) illustrates this point.

Amelia's 4-year-old son with autism goes ballistic in the grocery store check out line. As Ryan is pulling things off the candy racks, flapping his arms, and screeching, strangers are staring, shak-

ing their heads in disapproval, and more. Amelia grabs Ryan by the hand, looks at the congregation and says, "He has autism." This, she thinks, helps people understand why Ryan is behaving this way. Sounds okay, right? Wrong!

Let's look at the same situation involving a child who *doesn't* have autism, and here's a clue: how many 4-year-old children who *don't* have autism go ballistic in the grocery store check out line?

Picture Monica and her 4-year-old Trey, who doesn't have a disability. When Trey goes ballistic in the grocery store, does Monica grab him by the hand and announce to the onlookers, "He takes after his dad!" (Monica might *want* to say that, but she probably doesn't!) The point is, family members and friends of people who don't have disabilities do not apologize or explain! Why should we?

Now on to using humor! Following are several examples you can use as is, or modify them for your particular circumstances. In most cases, you'll need to talk about these responses with the person who has the disability so he or she will be in on the scheme!

Responses to: "What happened to him?"

Become very serious and respond, "You know, we're not sure! A meteor landed in our neighborhood last night, and all the boys [or girls or 20-year-olds or whoever] in the neighborhood were affected. Do *you* know anything about it?"

Good humor is one of the best articles of dress one can wear in society.
William Makepeace Thackeray

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Or, if parents are together when this question is asked about their child, they can simultaneously point to one another and exclaim, “He/She did it!” And then laugh uproariously.

Response to: “Was she born like that?”

With as straight a face as you can manage, and with pride oozing from your voice, say, “Why, yes! She has the Albert Einstein syndrome.” (You could substitute a famous name: Marilyn Monroe, Zorro, Barbie, etc. or use a silly word—Eggplant Syndrome or Presidential Syndrome!) Alternatively (and this was shared by another parent), when someone asks, “Was she born like that?” you can hold your hands about fifteen inches apart and respond, “No, she was about like this when she was born.”

In most cases, QUESTIONERS will quickly turn away when any of these responses are used. However, if the QUESTIONER persists (or you could also do this to begin with), begin digging in your purse for pen and paper and say, “I don’t have time to go into further detail right this minute, but give me your name phone number and I’ll call you tonight! What would be a good time?” The INQUIRING MIND will most likely back pedal away as quickly as possible!

Responses to stares:

If it’s a stare “in passing,” at the mall or somewhere else, smile the biggest, goofiest smile you can, wave like you’re Miss America, and say, “Hi! How are you?” as you keep moving.

If it’s a “standing still stare,” as when you’re in parallel check-out lines, your technique will be a little different. Make eye contact with the STARER and then look to your right and left, as if trying to determine if you’re actually the STAREE. Make eye contact again and point to yourself as in, “Me?” followed immediately with a big grin and an even bigger wave, as if you’ve been recognized for being a famous person!

Of course, people with disability labels can take on as great a role as possible in these humorous endeavors. For example, a child or adult with a label can proudly announce, “I have the

Eggplant Syndrome,” and/or the person can take an active role doing the waving and grinning.

Ed Roberts (1939-1995), the Father of the Independent Living Movement, used a power chair and

breathed through a portable ventilator tube. He made a *conscious* decision that when people stared at him, he would believe they were staring because *he was a star!* Ed’s technique took the power away from the STARER and put it squarely in Ed’s lap. These techniques can do the same for you.

Using humor can protect a person’s privacy and feelings. No longer will you feel defensive or angry. You can laugh and enjoy the moment—let humor come to the rescue!

Other ideas can be found in Kathie’s book, *Disability is Natural: Revolutionary Common Sense for Raising Successful Children with Disabilities*. Visit www.disabilityisnatural.com or call toll-free 1-866-948-2222 for more information.

Good humor isn't a trait of character, it is an art which requires practice.

David Seabury

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