

REDEFINING DISABILITY

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow

“Disability is a natural part of the human condition that does not diminish the right of individuals with developmental disabilities to enjoy the opportunity to live independently, enjoy self-determination, make choices, contribute to society, and experience full integration and inclusion in the economic, political, social, cultural, and educational mainstream of American society.”

The U.S. Developmental Disabilities and Bill of Rights Act

Yes, disability is a natural part of life! There have always been people with disabilities in the world, and there always will be. Some people are born with disabilities, and some acquire disabilities through an accident or illness. And those of us who do not *now* have a disability *will* have one, if we live long enough! One in five Americans is a person with a disability, making people with disabilities the largest minority group in the country—how can disability *not* be natural?

Historically, a disability has been seen as a “curse,” a “problem,” a “tragedy,” and in many other ways. But with the rise of the Disability Rights Movement during the past 35 years (beginning with parents who agitated for a public education for their children) new ways of thinking about disability, as described in the Federal law above, are emerging.

Today’s concept of disability, based on Federal and state laws, is a *social construct*—read on—and because it *is* a social construct, we can *deconstruct* it! I hope you’ll consider and embrace new ways of thinking.

DISABILITY IS, FIRST AND FOREMOST, A MEDICAL DIAGNOSIS. You probably have at least one diagnosis right now—or you had one a couple of weeks ago, or will have one or more in the future. Does *your* diagnosis—myopia, sciatica, cancer, acne, menopause, or anything else—define you? If we do not allow other diagnoses to define human beings, we can no longer allow a disability diagnosis to define a person, his abilities, potential, or character.

In addition, medical diagnoses are generally considered private, personal information. A person who has cancer doesn’t tell every Tom, Dick, and Harry, “I’m cancerous...”, so people with disabilities, family members, teachers, and others should not be the town criers, revealing private information (the disability diagnosis) which is nobody’s business! Where are our manners?

DISABILITY MEDICAL DIAGNOSES BECOME SOCIO-POLITICAL PASSPORTS TO SERVICES. A “disability status” represents a set of conditions (described in laws and social policies) which entitle a person to receive certain services or legal protections. So, within the *service system* (including *special education*), disability descriptors are important passports. But within families, among friends, and in the community, a disability should be irrelevant!

Expanding on the Federal law mentioned above, **DISABILITY IS SIMPLY ONE OF MANY CHARACTERISTICS OF BEING HUMAN.** Some people are born with conditions we call disabilities, others are born with lighter or darker skin, or with brown eyes or freckles. Some people practice Christianity, others Judaism; some people eat meat, others do not. There are many differences among humans, and just as a person who has freckles, or brown eyes, or who practices Christianity, or doesn’t eat meat cannot be defined by any of those characteristics, individuals cannot be defined primarily by the characteristic of disability.

In addition, there is nothing “wrong” with a person who has a disability, anymore than there is something wrong with a person who has any of the characteristics mentioned in the previous paragraph. There is, however, something wrong *with us* when we cannot accept the unique humanity of others. Imagine what it must feel like to be a child or an adult with a disability who has—all her life—heard her parents and others who are supposed to care about her, talk about what’s wrong with her! *How can we do this to people?*

The commonly-heard question, “What’s wrong with him,” is a result of the Medical Model paradigm of disability (“something’s wrong that needs to be fixed”). Again, there have always been people with disabilities in the world and there always will be. When will we recognize that there is no such thing as “normal”—bodies

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and minds come in all shapes and sizes! The Medical Model paradigm has, unfortunately, infected all areas of our society, including the public school system, resulting in many educators believing their job is to remediate a child's disability. Yet special ed law embraces the "disability is natural" paradigm, and requires schools to educate children with disabilities in general ed classes and provide them with the assistive technology, supports, and modifications they need to be successful in the real world. It's time to reject the harmful Medical Model of disability—children and adults with disabilities are not broken, and they don't need to be fixed!

A DISABILITY SIMPLY REPRESENTS A BODY PART WORKS DIFFERENTLY! Not better or worse, just differently! A person with cerebral palsy has legs or arms that work differently. A person with Down syndrome learns differently—and not "slower" (show me one person who is an "average learner")! A person with autism has a brain or behavior that is different—and don't all our brains work differently? In essence, it's just a matter of degrees.

DISABILITY IS A CONSEQUENCE OF THE ENVIRONMENT. When, for example, are most children diagnosed with ADD, ADHD, sensory integration, and similar conditions? In many cases, not until a child is enrolled in public school, and the diagnosis is usually the result of a child's learning style not matching an educator's teaching style! Instead of modifying her style, the teacher says the child has "problems" and she wants him out of her classroom—so into the Special Ed room he goes! Funny, though, that the child learned just fine—in ways that were best for him—between the ages of birth to five before formal, compulsory education! In essence, the child does not have a "disability" *except within the school environment!*

Furthermore, when we *change the environment*—by providing a person with the assistive technology, supports, or accommodations she needs—the disability is no longer a barrier to learning, friendships, employment, self-sufficiency, self-determination, freedom, interdependence, or anything else. Under these circumstances, the disability becomes irrelevant.

For example, when my son uses his power wheelchair, computer, and other devices in our accessible home (or other welcoming environments), he does not have a "disability." He can go where he wants, get what he needs, and so forth. Yes, he has cerebral palsy, but when there are no environmental barriers, his condition (CP) does not constitute a "disability." Ditto when any person has the supports, modifications, assistive technology devices, or accessibility he needs.

In his book, *The Politics of Disablement*, author Michael Oliver, asks us to move from the "Personal Tragedy" view of disability to the "Social Oppression" paradigm, as he compares the Disability Rights Movement to earlier social justice movements. At one time in our society, the dominant "white" majority looked at "black" people and essentially said, "The problem is the color of your skin." Women, at one time, were essentially told, "The problem is your gender." The Civil Rights and Women's Movements changed these paradigms, and helped us realize that the problem never was a person's skin color or gender. The problem was societal attitudes which led to social oppression. The same is true with disability. The problem never has been a person's disability; the problem has always been (and continues to be in many quarters) our attitudes about disability. *Attitude is everything!*

Redefining/deconstructing disability is critically important in our efforts to ensure people with disabilities are included in all aspects of society. When we see disability differently, we'll think about it differently, we'll use different words, and our actions will lead to the inclusion and full participation of individuals who have been assigned a disability status.

Redefining/deconstructing disability is even more important to those who have conditions we call disabilities. When we help children and adults understand that the "problem" of disability is not within them, but within attitudes and the environment, the heavy burden they've been carrying—the burden that usurps their self-esteem and corrodes their self-image—will be lifted.

Changing our attitudes and the environment, instead of trying to change people with disabilities, must be our mission if we ever hope to create a society where everyone is valued and everyone belongs.

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