

Shhhh! Someone's Listening, Watch Your Language!

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow

On a network morning show several weeks ago, the newswoman (in the New York TV studio) was interviewing a mother (in her living room in California) about some “childhood disease.” The woman’s 8-year-old daughter (who had the condition) was sitting next to her on the sofa. During the interview, the camera was usually on a close-up of the mother as she talked about how the “disease” affected her daughter. The newswoman asked a variety of questions, essentially focusing on “how awful” it all was. As the interview progressed, the mother continued blabbing about the “awfulness” of it all, and, by now, the camera widened to show the mother and her daughter.

Watching it all, I wondered what it felt like to be the little girl—to have your mother talking about you like you weren’t there—when, lo and behold, the little girl began making faces at the camera. (*Dub!* She was communicating her dismay in the only way she could, at that moment in time.)

In an attempt to retake control of the interview, the newswoman interrupted the mother and said to the little girl, “Are you having fun being on TV?” The little girl shook her head in the negative, at which point her mother *spoke for her* and said, “Oh, yes, she loves this, don’t you, honey?” The little girl kept shaking her head and frowned, then relented under pressure from her mother and reluctantly nodded, “yes.”

From my perspective, it seemed obvious why the little girl was making unhappy faces. She didn’t like being talked about as if she wasn’t there—something that seems to happen on a regular basis to many children and adults with disability labels. Did the mother

really think her daughter didn’t hear what she and the newswoman were saying? Didn’t they consider their words might hurt? I have a feeling the mother had talked about her daughter as a “diagnosis” and about the “awfulness” of her condition for so long that she forgot her little girl was a real person with feelings.

For many years, as a presenter and author, I’ve nagged about this hurtful practice—knowing that most people who blab this way don’t *intend* to cause harm. They simply aren’t aware of the consequences of their actions. (On a side note, have you ever wondered if a person’s so-called inappropriate or negative behavior might be the result of his anger or frustration at being talked about?) When people *become* aware of the consequences of their actions, many change their ways! I hope you will, too, if blabbing about a person like he’s not there has become a habit.

But now I want to push things even further. (Like my friend Cary Griffin says, “If you’re not standing on the edge, you’re taking up too much room!”) Not only can we stop the demeaning practice of talking about a person in front of him like he’s not there, *we can pretend the person is always with us*—as an invisible spirit who sees what we do and hears what we say.

What would this mean? Let’s say you’re a parent. Traditionally, at an IEP meeting, the child is not present and there’s lots of discussion about your daughter’s “problems and blah, blah, blah, blah...”

The best solution is for your daughter to attend the IEP meeting. (YES! It’s *her* education, she should be there.) When the child is present, everyone knows she’s a real person, not a laundry list of negative

*Count not him among your friends who
will retail your privacies to the world.*

Publilius Syrus

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descriptors in this file and that. And we can remind everyone at the meeting that since the child is present, we'll talk *to* her, not *about* her!

If the child is not present at the meeting, or in other situations where parents need to talk with professionals about their children, you, as the parent, can pretend your child is with you—you can carry her spirit with you. Then, instead of talking about your daughter's problems, you would describe her strengths and needs, as well as positive strategies for change, and she would no longer be a "bundle of problems." ("The Problem with 'Problem'" article explains how to reframe problems into needs. Let me know if you'd like a copy.)

In this situation, you would most likely speak more respectfully, in more positive terms, and you would present a different image of your daughter. In the process, you would learn new ways of thinking about your daughter, you would teach others new ways of thinking, and you, along with others, would *see her and treat her differently*. Others may even begin to model the positive language you use. This outcome may not happen overnight, especially with people who are accustomed to the "deficit-model" paradigm of disability, but your unwavering persistence will pay off.

We should start this practice as early as possible (but positive changes will occur no matter how old the person is when we change our ways). I recently met with several parents to plan a seminar. Laura's precious 4-year-old daughter was with her. At various times during our meeting, Laura talked about Lizzie like she wasn't there! Lizzie didn't have a lot of oral communication yet, but I always like to err on the side of caution and presume that she understood what we were saying. I didn't want to embarrass Laura in front of the others or her daughter, so I waited until

the meeting broke up, then told Laura I needed to ask her something and asked if one of the other parents could watch Lizzie for a second. I moved several feet away and motioned to Laura to join me, then said, "I wanted to ask you something, but I didn't want to talk in front of Lizzie..." I hoped Laura got the message. (And even *that* wasn't the best way to do something, for children are very intuitive and Lizzie might have guessed we were talking about her, and that can be just as bad! But I hoped this one small transgression might prevent bigger ones in the future.)

If you're an educator, have you ever thought about the words used to describe a child at the IEP meeting or when talking

with other teachers? Too often, the child is painted as a "series of deficits"—and as a result, what teacher wants *this* kid in her classroom? Shouldn't we speak respectfully about a child, remembering that he has strengths, gifts, and abilities, as well as needs (instead of "problems")? What might happen if, in the future, you pretended the child was always present when you talked about him?

If you're a service provider who routinely meets with other staff people to discuss individuals with disability diagnoses, you can also pretend the person being discussed is sitting right next to you. And following the example mentioned previously, you might begin to think differently about the person, treat him differently, and discover the "real person" behind the disability label. What a concept!

In the final analysis, isn't this actually about good manners? Somehow, many of us lose our sense of manners and develop our own "inappropriate behavior" when it comes to talking about individuals with disabilities. Isn't it time to find our manners? Isn't it time to remember that we always need to watch our language? Isn't it time to remember that people have feelings? So, shhhh—

*What people say behind your back
is your standing in the community.*
Ed Howe

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