

Capabilities vs. Deficits

The Impact of Acknowledging Challenges: Youth with Autism and Developmental Disabilities

Acknowledging your son/daughter or student's challenges sets a powerful direction in planning, and can become a foundational building block. Consider this question: "Can acknowledging a person's challenges really set the direction that can build upon a person's self image and social belonging? YES, it is the first and most important step. In fact, acknowledging a person's challenges is different from focusing on a person's disability characteristic.

Let me demonstrate through this example. This is Elaine's story. I want you to see that when others began acknowledging her challenges it became the first step of many to follow that changed her self image and capability to participate socially in her own way.

Elaine has autism, is 16 years old and in the 10th grade in high school. She is very introverted and quiet, always preferring to be alone. Elaine's disability characteristic from her diagnosis is stated in her records as follows: failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level. If we focus mainly on her disability we become stuck in our tracks, closed from seeing possibilities beyond the disability. This is especially the case in a world with rigid rules of conforming and independent standards.

Yet, if we dig deeper on Elaine's behalf, we could translate the disability characteristic into this: Elaine has a significant challenge to enter on her own into new situations or activities with peers her age.

Elaine's typical life was sitting at home after the school day ended and all weekend long. Her parents worried about her life and the uncertain future ahead when high school ended. They agonized how Elaine would fit in with her peers, have a job, or manage college. Most importantly, they were concerned about Elaine's emotional well-being and believed at times she seemed depressed.

Her parents knew deep down that Elaine had so much value as she has become a delightful teenager. But others just have not seen it yet. They also recognized that Elaine will require assistance to make a leap into any social setting that would connect her to others.

Her mother noticed one particular interest that captured Elaine's attention and her heart,

this was music videos. In her room alone she would sing and dance to her favorite song writers and musicians, pop, gospel, Christian, and blues.

Her mother believed that if others could see her musical interests as well as social challenges then possibly they would want to be part of creating supports that would enable Elaine. Her mother approached teachers and other leaders in school to discuss a plan for inclusion.

Now for the exciting results. Because of a teacher's understanding, Elaine began participating in drama class, as a team member choosing music and songs for the school plays. Due to the choir teacher's recognition, Elaine discovered she was a strong alto singer. She practices regularly with other altos in the school choir. Elaine began attending musical events in her community inviting friends and acquaintances from her school and church youth group, all supported and guided by her parents.

Indeed, it is difficult for Elaine to socially connect to peers independently. When her mother sought assistance, which drew upon others' support, this became the first step that moved her forward into developing a positive self-image and social belonging.

I offer you this checklist of questions. Think about your own family member with a disability and recognize how you can better acknowledge his or her challenges that can lead to creating individualized supports and new opportunities.

1. Cultivate Big-Picture Thinking

Am I thinking beyond my son/daughter's disability label in order to see interests and strengths?

2. Engage in a Capability Perspective

Am I dedicated to helping myself as well as others remove the focus of disability deficits regarding my son/daughter that could limit options for growth and self-image?

3. Harness Creative Thinking

Am I working to break out of my "box," exploring ideas and options, so my son/daughter can experience more enjoyment or inclusion?

4. Employ Realistic Thinking

Am I building a solid foundation by first acknowledging my son/daughter challenges and then interests and strengths?

5. Question Popular Thinking

Am I consciously rejecting the limitations of common thinking toward people with autism and related disabilities in order to accomplish uncommon results for my son?

I appreciate you taking time to read my blog. I have prepared this content just for you. I enjoy talking about the tools that help people with all disabilities and their families connect and live their lives more fully. I invite you to give me input and feedback as I am writing a book on Using the Capability Approach. Jackie@drjackiemarquette.com

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