

Living Natural Lives

Natural Supports + Generic Services = Community!

Revolutionary Common Sense

by Kathie Snow

The lives of many individuals with disabilities are unnatural. But having a condition which has been called a disability is *not* the basis of an unnatural life. No, the real basis can be found in the *unnatural environments and experiences* imposed on people with disabilities and their families.

When my son began receiving early intervention services (EI) and physical and occupational therapy at the tender age of four months, his life became unnatural. For the next six years, he spent more time as a *client*, with therapists and other professionals, than he did as a *child*.

When Benjamin first started therapy, I reluctantly enrolled his two-year-old sister in a Mom's Day Out program during the hours Benj was in therapy each week. Later, I found myself missing some of my daughter's activities because of my son's therapy sessions. Our family's schedule revolved around therapy and home visits by the EI service coordinator. Our lives were not our own anymore. Variations of this situation—some better, some worse—are mirrored in the lives of millions of other families.

For adults, a similar *atmosphere of clienthood* creates unnatural lives. Instead of working, they wait patiently at home (existing below the poverty level) for a voc-rehab counselor to find them a job. Many wake up every morning in a bedroom that's not their own, shackled to a group home and its rules.

Children and adults with disabilities spend an inordinate amount of time living unnatural lives in unnatural environments. Surrounding them are paid professionals, instead of family and friends in typical environments.

It won't take an Act of Congress (more services, more programs, or more money) to right this wrong. It only requires enthusiasm and a willingness to shuck the familiar trappings of the service system and today's conventional

wisdom, and embrace the abundant supply of natural supports and generic services in our communities.

Contrary to popular belief, natural supports are not cotton underwear! They're the everyday people and places in our community where friendships, networking, and mutual assistance are exchanged. Friends, neighbors, churches, and community activities represent a brief (no pun intended) list of natural supports. Generic services are the common, ordinary, typical entities that create the foundation of any community. The "services" may be provided by the actual entity or by individuals from the entity, and there may be overlap with natural supports. A partial list includes: private businesses, local governments, nonprofit and community organizations, churches, and civic groups.

At one time, prior to the creation of the service system (an evolutionary process that took many years), people with disabilities—like everyone else—*did* depend on the natural supports and generic services in their communities. They had to, since there was no system to turn to for help. But as disability-specific services have grown, individuals with disabilities and their families have abandoned non-disability generic services in favor of the specialized services they're told they need. There is an unspoken—and *unproven*—assumption that disability-specific services are better or more appropriate than generic services. But I don't know of anyone who can offer proof this assumption is valid, so shouldn't we question it?

Separation from the mainstream parallels the use of specialized services for one simple reason: services designed specifically for people with disabilities exclude people who don't have disabilities. And the degree of separation (segregation) is often in direct proportion to the number of disability services used.

The lives of too many people with disabilities and their families revolve around services.

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People who *don't* have disabilities live natural lives without really trying: a natural life is the default position! Ensuring natural lives for those with disabilities is easy when we look at the lives of those without disabilities and follow their lead.

Children and adults who want to be physically fit exercise in a variety of ways; they don't go to therapy sessions. So instead of physical therapy, children with disabilities can take karate or dance classes; participate in community sports activities (and make new friends at the same time!); or simply engage in lots of physical play at home with their families. Instead of water therapy, they can simply go swimming! Instead of horseback riding therapy, they can just go horseback riding! Do we really believe a child will not benefit from these experiences, even though a paid professional is not there to direct them? Alternatively, therapists can help parents, family members, and others learn how to incorporate beneficial "therapeutic-like" activities throughout the child's day, *in natural environments*, instead of providing hands-on manipulation at a clinic or in the home.

Adults with disabilities, with the help of family and friends (when necessary), can find employment the same way other adults do: by networking, spreading the word about the type of job they want, and beating the bushes to flush out job opportunities. They may decide self-employment (with its unlimited opportunity) is right for them. Why should they depend on voc-rehab or other disability-related employment counselors when there are so many more avenues to employment in the community?

Adults with disabilities may decide they want or need more training before entering the competitive job market. If so, they can attend trade schools or college, and seek financial assistance for education the same way others do: via scholarships, grants, and other methods.

These are just a few examples of the many ways we can ensure individuals with disabilities live natural lives. When I present this topic at workshops, it's not uncommon for a member of the audience to pooh-pooh these suggestions as "unrealistic," "too hard," or "not appropri-

ate." You may think these suggestions could work for "someone else," but not for your child or the person you're working with. But they can, and as I mentioned before, it simply takes enthusiasm and a willingness to make it happen. As Henry Ford once said, "If you think you can, you're right; if you think you can't, you're also right." So think out of the box, brainstorm, and use whatever method of creative, enthusiastic thinking is right for you. My best ideas usually come out of the blue—in the shower, while driving the car, or before dozing off each evening. Keeping pencil and paper handy is a must! (But I haven't quite figured out how to do this in the shower!)

*Nothing will ever be attempted,
if all possible objections
must first be overcome.*
Dr. Samuel Johnson

Please note that objections to this new way of thinking generally come from parents or professionals. Never have *adults with disabilities* responded in the negative (and if children were asked, I doubt if they would, either.) On the contrary, they usually cry out, "Yeah! Why can't we do things the way other people do?" Every adult who has taken the time to discuss this issue with me has stated, unequivocally, that the best jobs they ever had were the ones they got for themselves, not the ones procured for them by others!

The joy in discovering more natural solutions to meet people's needs is that there is no right or wrong way to do it! Within the system, we're forced to do things "by the book." But in our communities, we can do things any way we want!

You may be hesitant to make radical changes or give up the safety and security of the system for the unknown. If so, view this as an experiment. "Try it for 30 days," and if you don't like the way things are going, you can try a different approach or go back to the old ways of doing things.

Back to where we started: the presence of disability is not the cause of an unnatural life; it's the unnatural environments and aberrant experiences that are part of the service system that create unnatural lives. If we truly want people with disabilities to be included in every aspect of society, as participating, contributing citizens, we must look inside ourselves and discover what actions we can take to make this ideal a reality.

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