

When Less is More

by Kathie Snow

“My son needs a one-on-one aide in school,” Lori said. “Without an aide, Rob couldn’t do anything—he’d sit there and do nothing.”

“How do you know,” she was asked. Lori responded with information about Rob’s disability, the “facts” of what he can/can’t do, details of school policy (kids with certain conditions can be included in regular classes only if they have a one-on-one), and more. Her reply did not answer the how-do-you-know question. Lori could have answered the question accurately only if Rob had been permitted to be in the classroom without a one-on-one, and if we had observed what he was capable of doing on his own, with curriculum modifications, assistive technology, and/or the natural support of his classmates and teacher. Maybe Rob can’t do much for himself because he’s never been allowed to! Duh!

Rob is learning, however. He’s becoming proficient in learned helplessness. And in the minds of many, the constant presence of the paraeducator is—in and of itself—“proof” that Rob is essentially incompetent. How in the world can we expect Rob’s spirit to shine when it’s surrounded by a shadow?

Rob is caught in a vicious cycle: he’s not allowed to do much on his own, so he never learns to do much for himself, we continue to think he can’t do much on his own, so we make sure he has as much help as possible, which prevents him from doing for himself, and on and on and on.

Similar outcomes occur when parents, professionals, job coaches, or others are always “helping” individuals with disabilities. Again, the simple presence of so much help can reinforce the (erroneous) belief that a person is unable and needs all this help. Thus, a self-fulfilling prophecy is

realized—to the detriment of the person with a disability!

It seems we often believe the “worst” about a person (what he can’t do), and then try to do our “best” by providing large amounts of help, services, interventions, and so forth. In the process, many children and adults with disabilities learn helplessness. And this situation can be remedied when we adopt a “less is more” strategy!

When I make the gravy that accompanies a pot roast, I know what ingredients I’ll use: butter, flour, pan drippings, salt, pepper, and some herbs and spices. As I’m making it, I don’t dump everything in the skillet at the same time—I could ruin my creation! Instead, I add a bit of this and that, stir and taste, let it simmer, add a bit of this and that again, let it simmer some more, stir and taste again, and so on. This process is repeated until the gravy is just right. I don’t want to put too much of anything in the gravy—adding a little at a time works best. The same is true when an artist paints, a hairdresser cuts hair, and in

other creative endeavors. This “a-little-at-a-time” strategy can lead to more positive outcomes for individuals with disabilities!

Instead of automatically putting the most support in place (a one-on-one, job coach, etc.), what if we started with little or no support, and paused to give

the “ingredients” (a person’s abilities, the natural support of the people around him, and the environment) time to blend? Then we could add a little here and a little there, in the right amounts, so we don’t interfere with (and possibly ruin) the creation that’s developing.

For example, what if a child began the school year without a paraeducator? What if we allowed the child to explore his new environment, to see what he can do on his own? What if, when the student requires

“The more help a person has in his garden, the less it belongs to him.”

William h. Davies

assistance, we consider: assistive technology (computer, communication device, etc.), alternate methods of learning/curriculum modifications (activities in lieu of reading, using a calculator instead of doing math with a pencil, etc.), natural supports from classmates and the classroom teacher, and/or other methods that meet the student's needs and promote autonomy, self-direction, and inclusion? Specific assistance could be added in increments, and then we could let the new ingredients "simmer" before adding more.

If the services of a paraeducator are absolutely necessary, the help can be added after trying other methods first, and the para's help would be limited to specific activities/times, and would be "student-driven:" the paraeducator would follow the student's lead and "support" instead of "direct." We would expect success, and would also be prepared for struggles and even some failures. (After all, kids who don't have disabilities experience success and failure as they learn and grow.)

This strategy could be applied to children and adults with disabilities in the home, on the job, during community or recreational activities, and everywhere else. Less assistance can have a greater, more positive impact on a person's life than more.

What if, when a person tries to do something new and she struggles, we wait for her to ask for help instead of jumping in unasked? And what if we asked her what she wanted to learn or do instead of making those decisions for her? Consider the possibilities!

Too much help can have many unintended negative consequences. Again, children and adults with disabilities are treated as if they're incompetent and they often acquire learned helplessness—a terrible condition that may last a lifetime! In addition, many children and adults chafe against the presence of a "shadow" or a "coach" who's attached to them at the hip. Would you like someone next to you all the time, watching over you, helping you, keeping you "on task"? Most of us would resist this intrusion. And

when children or adults with disabilities resist, we don't recognize their actions as a desire to be more independent. Instead, we use words like "non-compliant," "aggressive," "manipulative," "behavior problems," etc. And instead of decreasing the help, we increase it, making the situation even worse!

The constant presence of a "helper" also gets in the way of friendships and natural supports. In a classroom, for example, a child with a disability might do just fine with help from classmates. But they'll never offer to help if a one-on-one aide is always present! Worse, who will want to be friends with a kid who's "so different" that he needs a grown-up with him all the time? In many general ed classrooms, if the student with a disability has a full-time aide, the classroom teacher takes no responsibility for this student. The student might be physically integrated in the classroom, but he's certainly not included—he and the aide are "doing their thing" and are not part of the whole. These less than desirable outcomes can also occur when a job coach or other helper is attached to an adult with a disability.

In a classroom, community activity, church environment, etc., an aide should always belong to the classroom/activity, not to the person with a disability. This will enable the teacher (or leader of the activity) and the aide to share responsibility for all, instead of singling out the person with a disability. And in the employment arena, wouldn't it be nice if a person with a disability could go to co-workers for help, just like others do? There might be some situations when a designated aide is needed—like helping a person with a disability in the bathroom, for example. But most of the help needed by a person with a disability can be provided by a variety of people, in the most natural way.

Isn't it time to replace learned helplessness, social stigma, and "special treatment" with self-direction and competence, real inclusion, and naturally-occurring assistance from friends, classmates, and co-workers? Less really can be more!