

Changing the Way We Think

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Everyone Together

all children, all together, all the time

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When you have a child with a disability you enter a new world filled with new people, new words, and new ways of thinking! One of the harder new lessons we, as parents, learn about "this new life" is that people, even well-meaning people, frequently make dangerous assumptions about our children and say things to us like: You have to be realistic about his future.* You must accept your child's limitations.* Assessments and evaluations of your child tell us what she can and cannot do.* You are expecting too much.* She'll never be able to _____ (fill in the blank).

I don't think folks intend to be hurtful or limiting of our children, but most people have a narrow experience with people with disabilities. They haven't seen many people with disabilities genuinely integrated in our communities, leading productive and meaningful lives, using unique ways to make this happen. Most of us were raised with the belief that disabilities are deficiencies, not just differences.

One of the pioneers in changing how we think about people with disabilities is Anne Donnellan who in 1984 launched the radical concept of "least dangerous assumption" as it related to people with disabilities. The "least dangerous assumption" states that "in the absence of absolute evidence, it is essential to make the assumption that, if proven to be false, would be least dangerous to the individual." (Rossetti and Tashie) In other words, we can never be certain of what people are capable of, so to avoid any grave consequences, we must assume that they have potential.

Zach Rossetti and Carol Tashie helped me understand the "least dangerous assumption" in their wonderful example of going fishing. They posed the question that if you go fishing for several days and do not catch any fish, what can you assume? You might believe that there are no fish in the lake since you did not catch any after hours of trying. Or you could assume that there are fish in the lake but you need to be patient, innovative, and persistent.

With the first assumption, you are likely to stop fishing, leave the lake, and abandon it. In the second assumption ("the least dangerous assumption"), you are likely to continue fishing, move to new places on the lake, try different bait, ask for the assistance of the local fishing community, or try a new way to cast the line.

When we apply this analogy to children with disabilities and we practice working from the "least dangerous assumption" then we do not abandon children who initially may appear unable to learn, communicate, or grow. We assume that they can do all of those things, just in different ways—ways that are waiting to be discovered. We assume that more time and creative strategies are needed to help draw out their abilities. We do not assume that their brain is empty as the lake described in the earlier example. We don't allow standard assessments or deeply embedded images of who learns stop us from seeing what might be. We teach them as if they can and will learn.

We assume that we need more time on this lake – a lake that is overflowing with fish of unusual colors, shapes, and sizes. We believe that the best bait is the belief that assumes competence of our children. That's the hook. That's how we unlock the potential in each child. That's how we will reel in the fish.

The charm of fishing is that it is the pursuit of what is elusive, but attainable, a perpetual series of occasions for hope. – John Buchan