

“Well, yes, she has a lot of problems with reading, math, behavior, social skills, and a few other things, but there’s no reason she shouldn’t be included in a regular ed classroom.”

“Oh, I’d like my son to be in the community, but he has too many problems.”

“I wish we could use a regular babysitter, but we have to use the respite care services because of all my daughter’s problems.”

“Well, we’ve been trying to place this guy in a job in the community, but he’s got a lot of problems.”

“I tried to get my daughter in the Girl Scout troop, but they said they couldn’t handle all her problems.”

My unscientific study of language reveals that the #1 word used about people with disabilities is “problem.” And the problem with “problem” is that it’s also the #1 word that activates exclusion! Let’s look at the bigger picture of the error of our ways and the “Duh!” factor will be revealed!

Peggy wants her daughter, Brittany, included in a regular ed classroom. She knows the law (IDEA), has done her homework prior to the IEP (Individualized Education Program) meeting, and feels confident she’ll be successful. But her best laid plans fall apart when the regular ed teacher hears the laundry list of Brittany’s “problems.” The classroom teacher just doesn’t feel she can handle this “bundle of problems” named Brittany.

Similar situations are repeated every day, across all environments: inclusion in the community and in school, real employment, independent living, and everywhere else! In most cases, our efforts are noble: we attempt to ensure the needs of a person with a disability will be met by describing all their “problems.” But when we use the word “problem,” we set a person up for failure in our own minds, the minds of others, or both.

Worse, however, is how this makes children or adults with disabilities *feel about themselves!* What

THE *DUH!* FACTOR

The Problem with “Problem”

Revolutionary Common Sense
by Kathie Snow
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must it do to their hearts and minds to repeatedly hear others speak of them primarily—or only—in terms of their “problems”?

Forget for a moment that you know anything about people with disabilities. As a teacher, business owner, or leader of a community activity, what reaction would *you* have if someone wanted *you* to take responsibility for a person with a basketful of “problems?” You, too, would most likely reject the whole idea. So add a big “*DUH!*” when wondering why our efforts at inclusion often fail.

The solution to the dilemma we have created is relatively easy, however. It takes no more effort than speaking about people with disabilities *in the same ways we speak about ourselves!*

Think about the following two questions. Do you regularly tell friends, acquaintances, and even strangers, the most intimate and/or negative details of your life? Do you routinely detail what you need by describing your “problems”? Most likely, the answer to both questions is “no.” If we don’t do it to ourselves, we must not do it to people with disabilities!

Let’s look at these two issues one at a time. We don’t usually share intimate details of our own lives with casual acquaintances, but we routinely expose the lives of people with disabilities for public consumption. Parents, accustomed to reviewing a child’s history to every professional they come in contact with, frequently get in the habit of blabbing very intimate details about their children to other parents, educators, and even strangers in the grocery store! Many adults with disabilities have inadvertently been “trained” to do the same about themselves. And professionals often divulge far more information about a child or adult than is actually necessary.

In general, we reveal intimate details about people with disabilities even though *they have never given us their permission to do so.* How dare we behave in such an arrogant and patronizing manner? How dare we violate a sacred trust? How would *you* feel if

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your spouse or best friend described personal details about your “problems” with others over lunch?

A very few circumstances (doctor visits, IEP meetings, and so forth) *may* require the sharing of personal information. But in general, way too many stories are told about people with disabilities—personal, intimate, private details—*that are nobody’s business!*

The second issue concerns how we talk during those few times we *do* need to discuss details about a person’s life with others. Let’s look at how we talk about ourselves, first.

In essence, *we* frame our “problems” as “needs.” For example, I wear glasses or contact lenses. I do not announce, “I have a *problem* seeing.” Instead, I say, “I *need* [or wear] glasses.” If we change the way we talk—by changing “problems” to “needs”—not only will we speak more truthfully and with more respect for people with disabilities, but we’ll also change the outcomes of our efforts!

If I described my son in the traditional way, I might say, “Benjamin has problems walking, writing, feeding himself, going to the bathroom by himself, and” Shall I go on? And the odds are great that this description would scare the pants off a classroom teacher or a youth group leader. Instead, however, I speak about my son the way I speak about myself, by describing his needs: “Benjamin uses a power chair, does his work on a computer, uses forks and spoons with big handles, and needs some assistance in the bathroom.” This presents a far different—and more accurate and respectful—image than the “problem-filled” description!

But there’s more. Most of us strive to create a good impression when we meet someone new, during our daily experiences, and anytime we’re out in public. Common sense dictates that we share *positive* information about ourselves. In addition, if I want you to know about me, I would not describe my functional abilities: “I can walk, talk, feed myself, hold my temper (most of the time)...” and so forth. Instead, I would share positive *characteristics* about myself: I enjoy reading mysteries; I like to sew, travel, and camp out; I love being at home with my family; I dream of having an RV; and more.

We must do the same for people with disabilities! When we need to speak about children and adults with disabilities, let’s make sure that in addition to describing a person’s needs in a positive way, we also detail who they are in terms of their wonderful and unique attributes: their interests, talents, abilities, and dreams!

Think about your most recent efforts to ensure a person with a disability was included. Did you inadvertently set failure in motion by the words you used? (Is it time for the heel of your hand to make contact with your forehead in a “*Duh!*” moment?)

If so, fear not! We’ve all done it, but each of us is capable of powerful change! Spend some time thinking about how you’ll reframe “problems” as “needs.” Consider which positive characteristics you’ll add to the mix.

And when pondering how you’ll speak differently in the future, keep in mind that respecting a person’s privacy means there are times *when it’s best not to speak at all!*

“PROBLEM”

He has behavior problems.

She has reading problems.

He’s nonverbal.

She can’t feed herself.

He can’t walk.

“NEED”

He needs behavior supports in the classroom.

She needs large print [or books on tape].

He communicates with his eyes [or a speaking device].

She needs assistance with eating.

He uses a power chair.

HOW CAN YOU REFRAME “PROBLEMS” INTO “NEEDS”? BE CREATIVE AND POSITIVE!