

**Disability Awareness** vs. **Similarity Awareness**

*Revolutionary Common Sense*  
by Kathie Snow

Dedicated advocates across the country routinely present disability awareness workshops to audiences of students, community members, and others. Their efforts are an attempt to educate others about people with disabilities, in order to decrease discrimination and/or create a positive environment for an individual with a disability in a typical setting of a classroom, job, and so forth. But we can do better, as I'll detail after taking a closer look at the flaws in traditional disability awareness techniques.

One well-known method of educating children involves using puppets or dolls which are supposed to represent children with a variety of different disabilities. I've seen dolls who "use" wheelchairs, crutches, and other assistive devices; puppets with a missing arm or leg; and dolls who have facial characteristics representing children with Down Syndrome. This approach is founded on the belief that since children play with puppets/dolls, these props will hold a child's interest and provide an appropriate teaching tool for the speaker.

But let's examine this approach a little closer by applying it to other groups of people in our society. Would it be appropriate, for example, to use "dark-skinned" dolls to teach "white" children about African-American children? Would it be respectful to use "Indian puppets" to educate children about Native American people? Or what about using girl dolls to teach "female awareness" to boys?

Let's assume these methods were commonly used. If you were a child of African-American or Native American heritage sitting in the audience, how would you feel? Worse, perhaps, what if—in order not to hurt your feelings by talking about you and "your kind"—you were excluded from the audience?

Now let's take a closer look at an imaginary "African-American Awareness" presentation. The presenter would most likely be an adult of Euro-American descent (I can't imagine an African-American man or woman doing this). How would the "white" teacher go about teaching "white" children "African-American awareness?" Would she have different dolls to demonstrate the many *shades* of darker skin? Would some dolls have wider noses, larger lips, and other "different" physical characteristics?

Would these examples be appropriate? Would they be helpful? Are they accurate? Would they foster a belief in the equality and dignity of children from African-American families? Would such a presentation enable "white" children to "understand" what it's like to be "black?"

If it's not appropriate to use puppets/dolls to create an awareness of other groups in our society, *it's not appropriate to use them for people with disabilities*. It's that simple.

People who support puppet/doll shows have the best of intentions. Their hearts are in the

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right place, but the outcomes of their work are less than desirable.

Puppet/doll presentations reduce children and adults with disabilities to a childlike, imaginary status—a “not really real” status. Simultaneously, the cute and cuddly puppets may be at odds with a child’s reality when he sees a person with a disability who is not perceived as cute and cuddly.

What’s the relationship between a child and a doll? The child is real, the doll is not. The child is powerful; the

doll is powerless. The child can make a doll do whatever she wants; the doll can do nothing. The child is master over the doll. While there may be no hard evidence a child would transfer feelings about dolls with disabilities to real children with disabilities, dare we take the chance?

What other messages do children receive? What words, what tone of voice, and what types of body language are used by the presenter? And what perceptions do these evoke in an audience of children? In the attempt to allay fears or misunderstandings, presenters may inadvertently instill feelings of pity toward people with disabilities.

Some presenters use “authorized,” prepared scripts. Others discard these as unworthy and substitute their own. But regardless of which verbal accompaniment is used, puppet/doll shows do not represent the best we can do, as you’ll see in a moment.

There are many who disagree with this criticism, as they describe how wonderfully children respond to these presentations. I have no doubt children react positively during the presentation. I have attended such programs and observed enthusiasm in the presenters and the audience. But I don’t know if this consequence is meaningful, positive, or long-lasting.

And finally, we must ponder this: I have never heard of an adult with a disability being

the leader of a puppet presentation. Adults *without* disabilities are the biggest promoters of this approach. Shouldn’t that tell us something very important? If puppet/doll shows are the best way to educate children about disability issues, wouldn’t adults with disabilities be the biggest supporters of this method?

A disability “simulation” is another strategy employed to promote awareness. But this method, too, frequently results in negative, unintended outcomes. Participants may don a pair

of glasses smeared with lotion to simulate low vision; wear a blindfold to simulate blindness; use a wheelchair; and so forth.

It’s not unusual, however, for the person using the wheelchair to giggle while trying to pop a wheelie; rise up and lift the chair over an obstacle; or perform some other feat that’s totally foreign to many people who use wheelchairs. And how can one accurately simulate having to roam city blocks looking for a curb cut; having to restrict your intake of fluids (even when you’re extremely thirsty) because you don’t know when you’ll find an accessible building with an accessible toilet?

A child wearing a blindfold waves her arms back and forth, feeling for obstacles. Then she and her classmates laugh uproariously when she trips over the leg of a chair. She can’t wait to rip the blindfold off and let someone else make a fool of himself! How can this exercise demonstrate the skill blind people have in maneuvering around barriers, the ways in which they use their hearing to enable them to move with ease and safety, or their other talents and abilities?

Instead of promoting an understanding what it’s really like to have a disability, simulations frequently perpetuate negative reactions (“Wow! I’m glad I’m not like that!”) which reflect pity, sadness, superiority, and/or even greater misunderstanding.

My criticism of puppet shows or simulation workshops should not be construed as criticism

*Puppet shows reduce people with disabilities to a childlike status.*

of the people who present them. Like many other practices in “disability world,” we do them because “that’s the way it’s always been done,” without questioning the validity of the practice or its outcomes.

There is *no method* that can truly teach others “what it’s like to have a disability,” anymore than one can be taught what it’s like to be of a different ethnicity, religion, or gender. More importantly, however, is that traditional “awareness” presentations usually focus on the disability conditions, and therefore, the *differences* between people with and without disabilities. And herein lies the fundamental danger: *society is all too aware of these differences!* It’s upon these differences that the monuments of pity, isolation, and segregation have been erected. We don’t need to teach others about disabilities or differences; it’s the *similarities* between people with and without disabilities that need to be promoted!

When is a “similarity awareness” presentation beneficial? In general, when a person with a disability first enters a typical, natural environment in which she doesn’t know anyone (regular ed classroom, community activity, new job, and so forth).

What would such a presentation look like? Unlike traditional—and generalized—disability awareness presentations, a similarity awareness presentation is designed for a specific audience with a specific outcome in mind.

Ask yourself: what outcome do I want? What changes do I want to see? How do I want people to think and act differently as a result of my presentation? What do I want people to know? *Think outcomes!*

Let’s look at some examples. Michelle is entering kindergarten and her mom, Carole, wants Michelle’s classmates to know her daughter is more *like them* than different. She also wants to replace pity and discomfort with respect and

positive attitudes. On the first day of school, and with the teacher’s support, Carole and Michelle give an informal talk to the assembled kindergartners. Carole begins by asking a series of questions: how many of the children like McDonald’s, who has a pet, and so forth, to illustrate the similarities shared by Michelle and her classmates. Differences are then explored: some kids have brown hair and some have blonde, but they all share similarities, too.

Next, Carole explains why Michelle needs mobility and communication devices, in ways that promote respect and dignity for her daughter. “Michelle was born with cerebral palsy. That means her legs and her mouth work differently.

But with her wheelchair and ‘talker,’ she goes where she wants and talks like

everyone else!” Then Michelle demonstrates her assistive technology devices and lets her classmates try them out. This helps demystify these “strange things.”

Steve, a 14-year-old with ADHD, isn’t so sure he *wants* all the other kids in his regular ed classes at the high school to know he carries a label, and he wants no part of a similarity awareness presentation! How embarrassing! At the same time, however, Steve, his parents, and teachers have agreed it would be helpful if Steve’s classmates understood more about the extra assistance Steve will be getting in the classroom, including his modified curriculum which includes more activity-based lessons.

They’ve designed a plan to address this issue, which will also include Steve’s similarities and strengths. During several homeroom periods, the teacher will lead the class in an activity in which *each student* will describe his own talents and gifts, *as well as needs*. The similarities and differences that coexist among the thirty students will be explored. When it’s his turn, Steve will let everyone know about his skill on the bas-

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ketball court, his vast collection of music CDs, and his interest in rock climbing. Next, he'll educate his classmates about how he learns best, and will share information about his curriculum modifications and other issues. In the process, he'll let his classmates know he may be calling on them for assistance throughout the year, adding that he'll be happy to reciprocate by providing "technical assistance" in the areas of basketball and rock climbing!

Luisa, a 29-year-old who is beginning her first job in the community, wants her coworkers to know several things about her, including: (1) she doesn't want to be pitied and (2) she can hear just fine and people don't need to speak to her in voices that are extra loud or extra slow. She's tired of people assuming she can't hear or think simply because her speech is different from others! Before proceeding, Luisa talked to her supervisor (Bob) to enlist his support.

On Luisa's first day on the job, Bob called a department meeting and introduced Luisa to her coworkers. He then turned the meeting over to Luisa. She told everyone how happy she was with her new position ("glad to be part of the team"), and shared a little information about herself which others could relate to: "I love to eat out—Mexican food is my favorite—and I go First Methodist church." These and other common characteristics demonstrated the similarities between Luisa and her coworkers.

Then she got down to business: "You can tell that I talk a little differently than you. That's just the way I am. But as you get to know me, you'll be able to understand my speech better. I want you to know it's okay to ask me to repeat

myself if you don't understand me. I'd rather you do that than pretend you know what I said. Okay? Also, I can hear and think just fine, so even though I speak slowly, *you* don't need to. And you don't need to raise your voice, either. I hear just fine! Does anyone have any questions?"

These are just three examples of the many ways we can educate others about people with disabilities in ways that reveal similarities, promote dignity and respect, and result in positive outcomes for all. In addition to presentations and activities that are focused on a specific person in a specific environment, you may also be interested in doing a generic similarity awareness presentation. If so, recruit a panel of children and adults with disabilities—real people, not puppets—who can bring real-life experiences, real successes, real assets, and real similarities to audiences.

When the need or opportunity for a similarity awareness presentation arises, rethink what's really important and carefully consider the outcomes you want to achieve. In addition, remember these important tips: (1) the person with the disability should participate in the presentation to the greatest extent possible and (2) focus on similarities, remembering that a person with a disability is more like people without disabilities than different (just like a green apple is more like red apples than different)! And, finally, to ensure we move beyond negative, stereotypical images, we must show more respect and use People First Language. (Visit [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com) for the latest version of the People First Language article.) We have the power to influence positive and powerful changes in societal perceptions about disability. We can do it!

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