

Comparison: The Thief of Joy

From the www.disabilityisnatural.com E-Newsletter by Kathie Snow

“Comparison is the thief of joy,” attributed to President Theodore Roosevelt and others, evokes a powerful sentiment that can be life-changing. If we compare ourselves to others, we may be left with feelings of inferiority or superiority—and neither creates an emotionally healthy human being! I’m reminded of the lines from Max Ehrmann’s “Desiderata” poem, wildly-popular in the early 1970s: “If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain or bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.” As we mature, we (hopefully) realize the wisdom of not comparing ourselves to others.

But let’s shift the conversation to children and adults with disabilities. If they’re “receiving services,” most are *routinely* assessed and *compared* to some “norm,” and are then usually judged to be “less than.” Consider the descriptors that may be used: deficient, sub-normal, below average, low functioning, severe, impaired, and so on. And once a comparison is made, it can be nearly impossible to see the person’s abilities, strengths, and/or talents. In addition, we may be unable to recognize that the person is *making progress*.

Comparisons, and their harmful consequences, can also occur outside of traditional disability-related assessments. Our son, Benjamin, has cerebral palsy and other diagnoses. He and his sister attended an inclusive elementary school where students with disabilities learned in general education classrooms. It was Parents’ Night, an exciting time for moms and dads to visit their children’s classrooms; Emily was in second grade, Benjamin in kindergarten. When all the parents entered the kindergarten classroom, we could see our children’s work—drawings of a cow—tacked up on the walls. Other parents had to get up close to find their child’s name on the paper (most of the drawings looked the same). But Mark and I spotted Benjamin’s drawing from 30 feet away. He had told us it was a cow and *we*

believed him—it was a Picasso-like cow. His teacher approached us and said, “I’m sorry his work doesn’t look like the other children’s.” I responded, “Please don’t ever compare Benjamin to other children. If you do, *you* will always be disappointed. *We’re* not—we *love* his work; we’re *proud* of how well he’s doing! But if you compare him to other children, he’ll never measure up in your eyes. Please compare Benjamin only to *himself*: what is he doing *today* that he wasn’t doing six minutes, six hours, six days, or six weeks ago, and then you’ll see the *progress* he’s making!”

I could share more personal experiences like this, but one example is enough. Unfortunately, there are millions of parents who can tell similar stories.

Yes, within the service system, assessment data may be the key that unlocks the door to “services.” But let’s be fair to the person and recognize that—contrary to popular belief—assessment results *do not* represent the “whole person.” They are, instead, a means to an end.

Whether a comparison is the result of formal assessments or informal observations (as detailed above), let’s become vigilant defenders against the “thief of joy.” Professionals must not steal the joy of parents by comparing their children to others. Ditto, professionals who work with adults with disabilities. When discussing the (usually) dismal assessment results, professionals can also detail the person’s strengths and abilities!

Parents must not steal the joy of their children with disabilities by comparing them to brothers/sisters and/or other children. They must also not rob *themselves* of parental pride in a child’s accomplishments by comparing him/her to others or allowing others to do so.

Anyone in a position of authority in the life of a person with a disability has great power, for good or ill. If we have unintentionally stolen joy by comparing, can we now, with generosity and goodness, take the time and make the effort to intentionally *restore* it?

**Everybody is a genius.
But if you judge a fish
by its ability to climb
a tree, it will live its
whole life believing
that it is stupid.**
Albert Einstein