

- SPED*NET Special Education Network of New Canaan, Ltd. - <http://www.spednet.org> -

Life Skills Don't Bring Happiness

Posted By [subash](#) On August 22, 2008 @ 5:25 pm In [ARTICLES](#) | [No Comments](#)

Just as the old saying goes that money doesn't bring happiness, I believe the same applies to learning "life skills." Money can enhance a person's happiness, but it cannot buy it. Life skills can also enhance a person's life, but are not an end all to happiness. It is also wrong to assume that the lack of life skills or money necessarily equates to an unhappy unrewarding life.

What are the things that give a person a "quality life" or "happiness?" Most people answer this by describing friendships, relationships, good times, and things such as having a sense of belonging and love. Very rarely, if ever, do people state that hair combing, vacuuming, tying their shoes, counting change or even grocery shopping are the things that make their life special.

Many people without disabilities do not cook, clean or grocery shop. Some hire others and some live with a spouse, relative or roommate who takes over these tasks. Almost everyone goes out to eat, or gets fast food. People go to hairdressers, wear, hats, wigs or shave their heads and do not need to use a comb. Many people without disabilities wear shoes that slip on, like loafers, sandals, or those that have velcro straps. Teenagers think it is cool to leave their laces untied. Many people do not count change, but throw it right in their pockets or use MAC cards. Yet, for children with disabilities, teaching them these types of skills are often the main focus.

Our systems are designed that children with disabilities must master life skills to earn access to the things that can provide quality of life. Schools tell parents their job is to teach academics. In the same breathe they often say children do not belong in regular classes because they need "life skills". I feel that life skills, without the things that give most people's lives quality, are of little significance. We put the cart in front of the horse when we expect life skills will give children the ingredients for a happy productive life.

In addition, children with disabilities are put under a magnifying glass and analyzed over and over again. Very often, without experiencing the typical childhood experiences and interactions, they are expected to learn to be "more" typical then most children. Then if and when someone or some policy deems them "normal" enough, they can move on to sharing typical experiences with others.

Some people believe in grouping children separate to learn life skills because they feel the world will not adapt for each child. That children need skills first before they can belong in the bigger world. I disagree because this view makes the presumption that every child is capable of mastering the skills; it ignores teaching children to function in typical environments using their abilities, adaptations or supports; and it focuses on weaknesses, not quality of life. My child is learning to adapt to the real world as he is, and others are learning how to function and interact with him. I feel that as children with disabilities are included in all aspects of their communities the real world "will" begin to adapt to their needs. This is more likely to occur when children with and without disabilities grow up together, knowing and caring about each other. With today's technology, those things that make daily routines easier for people with disabilities, are quickly being embraced by others as ways to make their lives easier, faster and more convenient.

A quality life is achieved through a balance in meeting physical, social, mental and spiritual needs in an integrated way. Fulfillment in each area effects functioning in every other area of life. When people feel healthy they can function better then if they are sick, hungry or tired. Having a sense of belonging gives more motivation then feeling alienated, isolated or alone. Being involved, stimulated and challenged gives greater focus then doing simple tedious tasks. Doing something that has meaning and purpose is more desirable then doing something that appears to be useless or a waste of time.

Can life skills be taught in "any" environment while maintaining an overall quality of life? Physically, children could have good health, safety and shelter in a variety of environments. Socially, they can not maintain an identity and sense of belonging with children in their community unless they remain in the same environments with them. Mentally, separate environments can be challenging and stimulating, however, they can not duplicate the entire atmosphere of the real world. Spiritually, teaching life skills in places where they are not typically encountered, and at times when they aren't necessarily needed does not provide purpose and meaning.

If a child has the potential to learn certain skills, the learning can be enhanced by meeting all of his or her basic needs, and by teaching when and where the skills are naturally needed. It makes sense to teach making a bed in the morning when a child needs to have his or her own bed made. Cutting paper should be taught when a child has a need and desire to cut the paper, toileting skills when there is a need to use the bathroom, and so on. My child did not learn to string beads by repetitious practice, but by a similar motion of plugging the cord on his Sega game, which was of great meaning and purpose to him. At the age of eight, he has not yet mastered a shape sorter, but by letting him use his abilities, he operates a computer and accesses the internet. He drinks out of a regular cup because we gave him a cup to drink out of, not because we thought he was "ready". He has friends in his community, not because he mastered any particular skill, but because he is in the regular class and shares experiences with other children who have learned to know him and understand his needs. He learned to place his order at McDonald's not from practice, but because he goes there with friends and family, and when using his communication device to ask for a cheeseburger he gets one.

Spending a lot of money and/or performing a ton of life skills will not give a person the same happiness as when they have a sense of belonging, friendships and relationships with others, good health, and are doing things that are desirable, meaningful and purposeful to the individual. Through adaptations, supports and interdependency quality of life does not need to be sacrificed when a child is not able to master certain life skills. It is more important to help a child learn to use his or her abilities, then attempt to eradicate the disability. Success needs to be measured in quality of life, not quantity of skills. Before any child's life can be enhanced with life skills, they need to first have a life.

Written by Colleen F. Tomko

Material Copyrighted 1996 Kids Together, Inc.

This material may be copied for non-profit use only. Please notify us of your intentions.

www.kidstogether.org

Article printed from SPED*NET Special Education Network of New Canaan, Ltd.:

<http://www.spednet.org>

URL to article: http://www.spednet.org/life_skills/