

Empowering People with Disabilities

Teaching Choice and Training Providers

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What is Personal Power?

- Power is the ability to control or influence the events in your life and in your environment.
- Power is the ability to make choices and have your choices implemented.
- Power is control over your body, your mind, your life.

Why Is Power Important?

- Personality-the quality of being a particular person- is built up from choices and experiences.
- Without power, individual growth and personal development is suppressed.
- Without power, there is no freedom, no choice, no control.
- Lack of power affects intellectual, emotional, and even physical development.

How do children get power?

- From infancy, children interact with other people and the environment.
- They learn from experience what will cause change.
- Later, children learn to tell people what they want.
- People ask them about their preferences.
- They are included in decisions about their lives.
- They are given choices.
- Often their choices are honored.

Why don't children with disabilities get the same power?

- Disability may limit interactions with people and the environment.
- Disability may limit their ability to tell people what they want.
- Others make decisions for them.
- Communication is often one way, or they are not part of the communication at all.
- People talk about them, and not to them.

How Do We Rob People with Disabilities of Their Power?

- We depersonalize people when:
 - we do not treat a person as someone with power,
 - we segregate people,
 - we make decisions about someone without honoring their choices,
 - we violate someone's personal space or body without permission,
 - we talk about a person as if they were not present,
 - we talk "for" them without consulting them.

What Impact Do We Have on Empowerment?

- Disempowerment happens over years of conditioning and depersonalization.
- Making choices and controlling the environment are SKILLS which must be learned.
- Children with disabilities may need extra help to learn to make choices and decisions.
- Children with disabilities need an empowering environment.

I. Changing Our Frame of Mind

- “Frame of mind” is made up of :
 - Our beliefs, attitudes and philosophy
 - Our values
 - Our language and choice of words
 - Our culture
 - Our behavior
- We must first have an empowering frame of mind to create an empowering environment.

II. Changing Our Frame of Mind

- Our beliefs, attitudes and philosophy, and values
 - Disability is a natural variation in the human species, not a tragedy or a punishment.
 - People with disabilities have the same need and right to personal freedoms and choice as everyone else.
 - We all depend on others to help us live our lives.
 - People with disabilities may depend on other people to exercise personal power.

III. Changing Our Frame of Mind

- Our language and choice of words
 - Use People First Language
 - Avoid undesirable terms –”cripple” “retarded” “wheelchair bound” “victim of ...” “normal people”

IV. Changing Our Frame of Mind

- Our culture
 - Complain about media use of images that evoke pity or sadness about disabilities.
 - Don’t support cultural images which portray people with disabilities as “special” “heroic” or whatever just because of their disability.
 - Complain about cultural stigma which associate disability with evil, violence, or ugliness.

I. Teaching Choice

- It is best to start teaching choice as early as possible.
- The person should be involved in all conversations that are about them.
- If you are working with a child or a person who has not had the advantage of being in an empowering environment they must have programs that will teach them choice.

II. Teaching Choice

- Choice and decision making are skills and like all skills are learned through life experiences or structured programs.
- People with disabilities often need specially designed instruction to learn these skills.
- Developmental programs should always incorporate making choices and decisions.
- Like communication, teaching choice should be integrated into all activities.

III. Teaching Choice

- When a choice is made, every effort should be made to carry it out, even if the choice seems silly or trivial to us.
- Of course, some choices are impossible or unsafe. This is an opportunity to teach limits, just as we would with anyone.
- Some disabilities limit a person's ability to control their own body. They rely on others to implement their choices. If we refuse, we deny them the most fundamental control of all.

IV. Teaching Choice

- Examples:
 - Choosing clothing ; Give a person a choice of shirts, let them express their preference in whatever way they can (may not be verbal), and always honor their choice.
 - Choosing body position: sitting up, lying down. Right side, left side, in the chair.
 - Choosing activities, bathing, grooming, recreation. What if she doesn't **want** to bathe today?
 - Choosing food: Have you ever overindulged in sweets? Do you always follow your diet?

V. Teaching Choice

- What if a person can't express a choice?
 - Everyone has preferences!
 - With careful observation we can tell what a person likes and dislikes.
 - People communicate their preferences through behavior.
 - When we give them the power to express these preferences and we honor them, we begin to teach the person how to make choices, and how to communicate them.
 - When a person's choice is honored, they will make more choices. Control is a great motivator.

VI. Teaching Choice

- Choice and decision making should be included in developmental plans and IEPs with goals and objectives.
- Choice should be part of other goals and objectives such as behavior, communication, activities of daily living, etc.
- No one should have to **earn** the right to fundamental personal control
- Personal Power is a right, not a reward.

I. The Empowering Environment

- The empowering environment gives a person control over their body and personal space.
 - Always get consent to touch or move a person's body, wheelchair, or bed.
 - Always get permission to straighten clothing, comb hair, wipe a person's face etc.
 - Honor any request to change positions.
 - Maintain a respectful distance.

II. The Empowering Environment

- Empowering communication
 - Never talk for the person, but be their interpreter, if needed.
 - Never talk about the person in their presence.
 - When others ask you what he/she wants, encourage them to talk directly to the person.
 - Give the person time to answer, help them understand the question.
 - Include the person in the conversation.
 - “Nothing about us, without us”

III. The Empowering Environment

- Empowering environments protect a person’s dignity.
 - Never “fix” a person up in public (straightening clothes, combing hair, washing face, etc.) except as anyone would do themselves.
 - Tend to personal appearance issues before going out.
 - Don’t do obvious “behavior management” in public.
 - Observe “wheelchair etiquette” rules.

IV. The Empowering Environment

- Talk about “helping the person” to do something, not “doing something” to the person.
 - “Helping Ellen eat” not “feeding Ellen”
 - “Helping Joe go to the bathroom” not “toileting Joe.”
- Don’t get in a power struggle with the person, our goal is to give the person the power.

V. The Empowering Environment

- People are the most important part of the environment.
 - Everyone who interacts with a person is part of the environment.
 - Direct support staff, teachers, aides, therapists, friends and family all need to know and observe the rules.
 - Most of these people will need training or information to increase their awareness.

VI. Empowering Environment

- Assistive Technology
 - Assistive Technology can give a person power over their environment.
 - Adaptive equipment can make a person independent of others, and it can teach a person control.
 - Environmental controls give a person power over some aspects of their environment.
 - Communication devices help people express their choices.

Control Issues

- What about “bad” choices?
 - “Age appropriate” choices
 - Who controls the “appropriateness” of our choices?
 - Should we sacrifice personal power for social conformity?
 - “Unhealthy” Choices
 - Does the choice really endanger the person’s health?
 - Shouldn’t everyone have some freedom to make poor choices?
 - Everyone’s choices have some limits.

Empowerment

“All life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality”

Martin Luther King, Jr.