



"LIVING IN NEW KINDS OF SITUATIONS"

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TRAINING FOR TODAY

An Adult is Determined by Virtue of Age and Not Intellect, Part 1

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Seldom do topics on which I train evoke the degree of controversy, defensiveness, hostility and outrage as issues dealing with age appropriateness. Yes, the debate continues, even after all these years in which so many of us have fervently proselytized the importance of relating to individuals as adults, irrespective of their capabilities. Many professionals and paraprofessionals, sincerely profess a view point and philosophy in opposition with contemporary thinking on the subject. Having trained many thousands of individuals on this topic, I find it remarkable that those opposing the contemporary position do so unrelated to their age, years of experience in the field, position held or extent of formal training.

When I introduce the topic of "age appropriateness," I preface the training with a considerable amount of self-disclosure. It

proves helpful in the training process to share with the learners that I too have struggled with this topic. I emphasize that over the last twenty-five years I have experienced a number of philosophical metamorphoses prompted and facilitated by my life experiences and contacts with professional colleagues. I clearly acknowledge, during my opening remarks, that they too may be growing in their thinking and beliefs on this topic. I indicate it is not my intent to impose my ideology on them, but rather cause them to question and analyze their position and manner of relating to the persons whom they serve.

There are nine issues that training for TODAY should address relative to the topic of age appropriateness. I have found it more effective to teach the topics in the order presented herein, in that they logically and sequentially lead (hopefully) to

the conclusion that "an adult is determined by virtue of age and not intellect."

1. THE OFFENDING APPENDAGE The hand is a marvelous instrument when used appropriately. So often, because of our perception of people with mental retardation as being child like" the way in which we use them serves as a reflection of our attitude. There is in our society a distinctive difference in the way in which we touch children versus adults.

In our interactions with children, we affectionately and probably appropriately (I attempt not to stand in judgment) express our emotions by patting children on the head, stroking their cheek (especially babies) and tickling their sides. The social rules under which touching occurs are influenced by many factors, including the age and sex of the child, as well as our role or relationship to the child.

Unfortunately however, there appears to be (for some persons) another set of rules regarding the way in which they touch men and women with mental retardation. These rules are distinctively different from the normative expectations relative to how we touch adults of the same age, but of greater intellect. In our training for TODAY, we must sensitize our staff to never use their hand "as an offending appendage."

I dramatize the inappropriate touching by going over to the most dignified and well kept individual in the group and pat them on the head and pinch their cheek. You can picture the response from the group, they see my behavior as obviously inappropriate and demeaning. I then ask the subject of my attention how my touching them in that way made them feel; their responses range from angry to uncomfortable.

It should also be emphasized that we as staff are significant role models for the individuals we serve. In the past, I so often questioned why I observed persons with mental retardation touching even strangers in such inappropriate ways; the answer to a great extent is found in the role models who so significantly influenced their behavior.

2. ITEMS EMBLAZONED WITH CHILD LIKE IMAGERY.

In training, I strongly and forcibly express the pain and disgust I feel when visiting a home and observe men and women my age with "Playskool" wooden puzzles or an infant's Busy Box. I do not attack the importance of having fun by possessing items in one's life that give one joy, quite the opposite! As we discussed in Universal Enhancement (page 11 of the November LINKS), it is essential that people have many things of value in their lives. When items in one's life, however, are normally associated with children great damage can result

to the individual's dignity. The presence of those age inappropriate items serve as discriminative stimuli, they tend to illicit from those present, age inappropriate responses toward the user.

I cite as an example in my training how we would likely respond if the fire alarm were to go off in the room in which we are training. Everyone acknowledges that we have been "conditioned" to immediately leave the area and exit for safety when we hear a fire alarm. Men and women whose skill and competence may reflect that of a child are more likely to be treated as children if they are surrounded by the artifacts that would normally be used by a child.

The resolution to this problem is not found by taking things away from people, that is a far too simplistic and an insensitive alternative. We must apply our creative energies and assist individuals to select alternative items that will enhance their dignity and evoke age appropriate interactions with others.

So often I am asked the question (metaphorically), "Is it ok if Larry plays with a puzzle?" The issue is not whether Larry has a puzzle, but rather for whom that puzzle was intended. Is it a puzzle "emblazoned" with words and imagery that identifies it as an item to be used by a child?

Many adults play with puzzles—I do. The puzzle I am currently working on however is a 500 piece jigsaw puzzle of a colorful bubble gum machine. Few of the men and women I serve who are challenged by a child's five piece puzzle would be interested in or capable of putting together a 500 piece jigsaw puzzle. Thus we must train staff to develop alternative options from which the individual can select.

In this instance purchasing a vinyl place mat with a picture of a preferred object (i.e., flowers, cars,

airplane, etc.) can be modified into an ideal puzzle. Merely draw two lines on the back side of the place mat dividing the surface into three sections. Using a pen knife or razor blade cut the place mat into three (or desired number of sections) following the lines that were drawn. As the individual gains skill in putting the puzzle together, additional lines can be drawn and further pieces cut.

In training staff to tap their creative talents in identifying more age appropriate items to be used in preferred activities, I will frequently ask staff to challenge me and pose a situation in which an individual uses an age inappropriate item. An item frequently posed are childrens' coloring books.

Here the alternative item for the preferred activity (drawing) is a three ring notebook binder with a label on the cover titled: George's (whoever) Sketch Pad. The notebook can contain either designs drawn by staff to be completed by the individual or photo-copied pages from a coloring book. In lieu of childrens' crayons, non toxic, washable felt tip markers can be provided.

Again, the point of the exercise is to recognize that many alternative items that are age appropriate can be presented to the individual to minimize and avoid the stigmatizing effect of childrens' items.

The importance of age appropriate items, activities and staff interactions cannot be over emphasized. Given the lack of observed success of many residential programs throughout the Nation in meeting a reasonable standard in this area, it is essential that this column comprehensively address the issue. Thus this is the first in a series of articles on this topic that will provide the reader with an array of strategies to enhance the quality of staff training on the subject.