No, Not "Special"...They Are

ORDINARY NEEDS

To create this article, I needed a computer with the software that meets my needs. To learn to write and read, my son, Benjamin—since the age of four—has also needed a computer with the right software.

To get to work every day, Richard needs a good set of wheels on his car. Holly also needs a good set of wheels to get from class to class on campus.

Miranda needs a clip-on wireless microphone before she can successfully deliver her keynote presentations. Jose needs a communication device before he can successfully express himself at home, at school, and in other environments.

Daniel, a doctor, needs voice recognition (VR) computer software to effectively dictate his daily notes. Samantha, an eight-year-old, needs VR software so she can write stories and book reports in third grade.

Kate spends 50+ hours at her desk, but couldn't do so without her ergonomic chair and curved desk that holds her multiple terminals. Amelia also needs a desk that meets her work needs—a height-adjustable, curved desk with desktop cubbys so everything is within arm's reach.

Acme Widget Company has risen to the top of its field because the individual differences—including some behavioral eccentricities—of all employees are supported and valued. Mrs. Dahl's classroom is viewed as a model of success and all students are learning, because she's created a caring environment where all students—including those with significant differences and needs—are valued and supported.

Tyrone is a great "honey-do" hubby at home. But he can't do *everything* for himself, so he occasionally hires a plumber or an electrician. Oscar is thrilled to have his own apartment, but he can't do everything for himself—including getting dressed and undressed—so his family and neighbors pitch in, and he pays for other assistance.

Maria cannot sit through the Sunday morning sermon without rhythmically shaking her right leg as it's crossed over her left, and she also doodles on the Sunday program. Tony cannot sit through church without occasionally flapping his arms and rocking back and forth in the pew.

To be successful at home, school, work, and in other environments, to achieve our hopes and dreams, and/or to simply get through each day, *everyone* needs assistive technology (AT), accommodations, and supports. The examples above describe these *ordinary needs* of a variety of different people. And as you might have figured out by now, the second example in each description represents people with disabilities.

Too often, however, we say children and adults with disabilities have "special needs." In another article (*The Case Against "Special Needs"*), I describe the dangers of using this term to describe individuals with disabilities, as in, "She has special needs." This descriptor generates pity, segregation, and worse.

But we need to take an even closer look at the consequences of the "special needs" mentality. For it seems that *identifying* the needs of a person with a disability as "special" and *using the term* "special needs" leads to the perception that these needs are different, extraordinary, expensive, and/or abnormal. This perception, in turn, may result in these needs *not* being met, and the negative chain of events ends with exclusion and segregation, loss of opportunities, the presumption of incompetence, and more!

For example, Julia, a child with a disability, is not talking and cannot write with a pencil. Based on formal assessments, she's said to have an IQ of 50 (and is presumed incompetent). As a result, her teachers and parents believe she must be in the special ed room where her "special needs" can be met. Speech and occupational therapists will attempt to help Julia learn to talk and write. Based on her IQ, it's believed she can't learn academics, so she'll be taught life-skills.

(But are we sure the assessment is correct? If one doesn't talk or write, how can a traditional assessment provide an accurate picture of the one's abilities?)

Would Julia's parents and teachers go without *their* computers for writing, along with their cell phones which they use *to communicate* with others? No! So, why should they deny these tools to Julia?

It's time to recognize that the needs of children and adults with disabilities are ordinary—just as ordinary as the needs of people *without* disabilities. Furthermore, AT, supports, and accommodations *are the pillars upon which inclusion and success are built!*

Because when Julia is provided with a speech output device and a computer for writing, she can demonstrate her competence and abilities; be included in an age-appropriate general ed classroom, as well as in typical community activities; make friends; and live a self-determined life of her dreams.

> *We can believe what we choose.*
> *We are answerable for what*
> *we choose to believe.*
> John Henry Newman

Stephen had been denied opportunities to get a real job because of "inappropriate behaviors." But when he was provided with behavior supports and the environment was modified to meet his needs, his "inappropriate behaviors" magically disappeared. There are certain work activities Stephen performs best with a co-worker, and others he does best alone. He needs the freedom to take frequent short breaks when stress builds up, and he needs only one "go-to" person when he needs help, instead of the multiple layers of staff used by co-workers. His employer is willing to do what it takes to ensure *all* his employees are successful—for that's what makes *his company* successful. Similarly, teachers in inclusive classrooms are doing the same for students who need behavior supports and other accommodations.

Assistive technology devices can be defined as anything that makes life easier or better—and they come in all shapes and sizes, and are used by everyone. A carpenter needs a good hammer; a *busier* carpenter needs a high-tech nail gun. A doctor needs the best and newest equipment—or would you prefer one who diagnoses with just a stethoscope? Look around your home and office. Could you get by without *your* computer, printer, cell phone, microwave oven, garage door opener, and . . . Make a list to see how dependent *you are* on all the AT devices in *your life!*

Supports—including behavior supports—come in many forms. Tobacco, caffeine, chocolate, shopping, daydreaming, whisker-pulling, crotch-rubbing, sports betting, hugs, sex, a comforting word, exercise, calling in sick when you're not, and many, many, many other things or activities help us get through the daily grind. Which of *your supports* would you be willing to go without? And haven't most of *us* exhibited "inappropriate behavior" when *our needs* weren't met?

Accommodations also come in a variety of shapes and sizes, including flex-time, a personalized workspace, music playing softly at bedtime, a boss or teacher who really listens and cares, an atmosphere that supports creativity, and much, much more. What type and how many accommodations do *you* use at home, work, or in other environments? And which would *you* be willing to go without?

Examine your own life with regard to needs that are ordinary, but *crucial to your success.* Now look at the individuals with disabilities in your life. Are inclusion and success in any environment being denied to them because their needs aren't being met? Can we continue to put the burden of failure on *their* shoulders? Isn't it time *we* took responsibility for our beliefs and actions, and our refusal to recognize that their needs are just as ordinary and important as ours?

It's time for swift and positive change to ensure children and adults with disabilities have the same *opportunities and experiences* most of us take for granted. And this will happen when their ordinary needs for assistive technology, supports, and accommodations are met. Can we afford to do anything less?