

# Meeting the Needs of Kids Who Don't . . . . (Fill in the Blank)

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Summer Inclusion Institute  
Wausau, Wisconsin

Char Brandl  
charbfc@yahoo.com

# Kids who have

- Multiple disabilities
- Severe sensory issues
- Autism
- Labels such as “CD-S”
- Severe Brain Injury
- Motor impairments

# Why it Matters

- We make dangerous assumptions
- They get overlooked and short-changed
- We might be WRONG!  
    Much better to presume competence
- With proper supports, they can do great things
- They spend a lot of time in school; what they do there is important
- They CAN Learn (How do we know???)  
    Think: Behavior  
        Those subtle clues  
        Some positive outcomes worth sharing

# Lesson Objectives

- (Very) brief history lesson
- Address concerns
- Open new doors (your minds, their opportunities)
- Share stories (mine and theirs)
- Move all of us forward a step or two ---  
or maybe even more!

# History Lesson

- Prior to 1975: Most of these kids were at home or in institutions
- (Char has had one year as a special education teacher, is home with four small children)
- 1975: Federal Law opened school doors for all; schools have struggled ever since to do what is right/best/reasonable
- (1976: Char takes part-time teaching position at a residential facility; begins her learning process)
- (1980: Char meets Sarah; crash course)
- (1992: Char learns about Facilitated Communication; nothing will ever be quite the same)
- 2001: No Child Left Behind
- (2003: Char decides it is time to retire; dares to dream others can learn from her experiences and especially her mistakes!)

# “Schools Struggle to Educate the Severely Disabled”

From the New York Times  
June 19, 2010

- Donovan’s story: “cognitive disabilities brought on by a traumatic brain injury”
- “cannot walk, does not speak and cannot feed himself or see much beyond shapes and shadows.”
- Donovan’s mother: “wishes his teachers would spend more time working on his practical challenges” (self abuse requires that he wear cotton mitts even while sleeping)
- “wishes he had physical therapy more than 30 minutes, twice a week”

- Donovan's Principal: “has broader aims. . . does not want to go back to the days when students like Donovan were given only art and music instruction, along with a narrow focus on practical skills.” (Also has a 38-year-old daughter with severe disabilities)
- Donovan's Teacher: “uses all of his creativity to adapt the lessons, writing his own books, using symbols, pictures and words.” (And is a first-year teacher!)
- Donovan's educational assistant (former): says of Donovan: “He understands very well, quite as much as you and I do. If he could talk, and he could see, he could express himself a little bit better.” (26 years on the job, four years one-on-one with Donovan)
- With new aides, Donovan seems unable to demonstrate the same level of awareness.

# What would you do?

Objection #1: We were NOT trained to do this!

- Well, true, but . . .

We are talking about a very small part of our school population

What if it were YOUR child?

What if YOU were that child?

What did Char do with Sarah (and all the others who followed)?



# I give you permission . . .

- To focus on making this student comfortable in your classroom.
- To trust your instincts and compassion.
- To work on establishing and developing a meaningful relationship.
- To help this child be accepted by others.
- To build an IEP that reflects his/her REAL needs.

# More on Donovan

- His mother “is grateful that her son goes to school like a regular student, and says that he seems happy most of the time.”
- His principal hopes “to strike a balance between functional and academic instruction, focusing on what is really important: the skills that Donovan will need to help communicate to caregivers in the years ahead.”
- “His habit of hitting himself started when he was about 5, the same age when he began attending public school, leaving a Helen Keller early intervention program for the blind.”

# What do they really need?

- Acceptance
- Safety, comfort
- Sense of belonging
- Self-esteem
- Social interactions
- Life skills
- An effective and meaningful means of communication
- Academics/intellectual challenge and stimulation

# How can we do all that?

- Objection # 2: There's not enough time or staff!
- But these kids usually have one-on-one staffing
- You are part of a team; keep everyone involved and use their strengths
- The parents usually can offer great insights and support; might even volunteer in the classroom
- (Char's great parents, OTs, SLPs, and paras!!!! could not have managed without them!)

- Objection # 3: There's no money for this!
- Money is a problem for all of us, but . . .
  - There are things we can do that are “free”
  - The law is on the side of the child
  - Our task is to do what is in the child's best interest
  - Make full use of computers and other technology
  - Welcome volunteers and peers or older students as helpers

# Freebies

- Learn all you can about the nature of the disability and how learning is affected
- Be a model for others in how you approach this student
- Watch your language
  - To them
  - About them
  - In their presence
  - Tone, volume, age-appropriate

# More freebies

- Go with strengths and interests
- Establish a relationship
  - Donovan's aide used tickling and head rubs to get him to *sing!*
- Facilitate other relationships
- Include them in any classes that might interest them; facilitate participation
- Take away any pressure on teachers to give them a “grade”

# How do we know they are learning?

- Were they learning the life skills we were teaching in the past?
- Are they happy?
- Trust; make that leap of faith!
- Find basic ways to get a response – keep motor response as low as possible, while keeping content level high enough to be challenging

# Back to Donovan

- IEP says he will (by November):
- “identify directional concepts like top and bottom, left and right with 100 percent accuracy.”
- “identify four United States coins and common shapes with 100 percent accuracy.”
- “communicate a message, a desire or need, using an electronic button or tactile icon, five times a day.”
- ***“The problem is that after 15 years of education, he has not learned how to do most of those things reliably.”***
- “Donovan has not yet demonstrated consistent functional communication to indicate purposeful needs, his plan states.”

# Donovan, again

- “Without knowing it, Mr. Adams’s (ed. assistant) efforts had touched on recent research in educating severely disabled children that focuses on using emotion and human connection to reach them. As higher functioning areas of their brains are underdeveloped, emotion moves them at a deeper level, lighting up the same part of their brain, the limbic system, as meaningful music, and possibly creating a bridge to greater intellectual cognition.”

# What Grandma Char has learned

- Most of these kids are capable of learning, understand what is going on around them, and want people to know they are “smart.”
- A test means nothing if an effective means of communication is not in place, and this includes IQ scores. Even performance-based tests are meaningless if there is a motor problem.
- Infinitely wiser to go with the Least Dangerous Assumption (Donnellan) and always Presume Competence (Biklen).

# Listen to the kids

- “Please understand that I look like I don’t know much, but I am really very intelligent.” (RB)
- “I tried to show the world that when people without speech were given the opportunity to participate in education we could succeed.” (AM)
- “When I see now normal people interact with their friends I am jealous.” (SR)
- “I see the world not only with my eyes but also with my heart.” (DM)
- “Keep trying to get more people to see how smart I am.” (QP)
- “ Never stop believing in me.” (NM)