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# PRESUME COMPETENCE

## CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM ABOUT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

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*This is one of three articles on this topic. The second article asks, “Do Disability Organizations Presume Competence,” and the third is entitled, “Eliminating the Presumed Incompetence Paradigm.”*

Within our judicial system, a person is presumed innocent. At trial, the person charged with breaking the law doesn't even have to take the stand to defend himself; it's up to the prosecution to present *evidence* which shows the defendant is *guilty beyond a reasonable doubt*.

Similarly, in every day interchanges, we meet new people at work, in a store, or in other activities, and we generally presume they're competent. We presume, for example, that someone labeled “teacher,” “doctor,” “cashier,” or “mother” is competent in the role. Sometimes, once we get to know someone better, we might discover he/she is more/less competent in some areas than others, which is true for all of us! (The late, great Ann Landers once cautioned us to remember that 50 percent of all doctors graduated in the lower half of their class—and the same is true for any other category of graduates.) But like the judicial counterpart of “presumed innocent,” our initial reaction to others is to PRESUME COMPETENCE. And there are many other instances where similar positive presumptions are made about a business, situation, organization, etc. It seems that, in general, we initially presume the positive, *unless and until we receive information to the contrary*.

The same is not always true, however, for individuals who happen to have disabilities. As a result of long-standing mythical and erroneous perceptions, when we encounter a person with a disability, positive presumptions and attitudes may be instantly replaced by negative stereotypes and prejudice (yes, we prejudice), and the person with a disability is *PRESUMED INCOMPETENT*. The guilt-by-association mentality may also kick in, so the person's parents may also be *PRESUMED INCOMPETENT*. (I was once told that my family was dysfunctional, our daughter was dysfunctional,

and my husband and I were dysfunctional because of our son's disability!)

There is *no proof* that the presence of a disability automatically confers an incompetent status. And many negative consequences result from our erroneous, unfair, and prejudicial presumptions. Children and adults with disabilities are segregated from the mainstream and isolated in special programs for treatments, interventions, and services. They may be prevented from engaging in the ordinary experiences most of us take for granted. Low expectations are the norm. Hopes and dreams are stripped away by physicians, educators, services providers, and even parents, as in, “People with \_\_\_\_\_ will never \_\_\_\_\_.”

*But have we ever given the person the opportunity to try?* Has a child had the opportunity to be in general ed classes or be involved in ordinary (and inclusive) activities in the community with whatever supports and accommodations are needed? Has an adult had the opportunity to have a real job, live on his/her own, and/or be responsible for his/her own life, with whatever supports and accommodations are needed? Has a child or adult had the opportunity to experiment with AT devices (such as power wheelchairs, communication devices, etc.)?

Traditionally, we've *PRESUMED INCOMPETENCE* and forced a person with a disability to *prove* she's competent before allowing her to be in a general ed classroom, participate in community activities, be employed in a real job, live in the home of her choice, etc. It's easy to see that our actions put people with disabilities in a no-win situation: because we presume they're incompetent, we don't give them opportunities to demonstrate their competence, and this, in turn, is taken as “proof” that they are, indeed,

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incompetent. The vicious cycle of the self-fulfilling prophecy is realized.

We would never, ever tolerate a change in our judicial system to a “presumed guilty” paradigm, in which the burden of proof was on the arrested person. And what kind of society would we have if *everyone* was routinely PRESUMED INCOMPETENT? For example, what if your house was on fire, but you didn’t call 911 because you presumed the firefighters were incompetent? Ponder other scenarios and recognize that the social contract, as we know it, would come to a screeching halt.

So why do we continue to inflict this horrendous injustice on men and women and boys and girls who happen to have conditions we call disabilities? Is it because we devalue people with disabilities? Do we see them as “less than” or “not fully-human” (one of many relics of ancient history), and therefore not entitled to the presumption of competence the rest of us *take for granted*? Can we admit this, and then correct it? If we don’t acknowledge the problem, we cannot solve it!

The PRESUMED INCOMPETENT mentality cannot be changed systemically in one fell swoop; the change has to come from each of us, individually. Then, the cohesion of our collective attitudes can and will influence the system and our society as a whole.

It’s not as hard as it might seem. We’ve allowed ourselves to be brainwashed into our current form of erroneous thinking; thus, we can “deprogram” ourselves by presuming people with disabilities are competent and ensuring they have the assistive technology, supports, and/or modifications they need in order to enjoy ordinary opportunities and experiences in inclusive environments.

Granted, it might be easy to look at someone who, for example, doesn’t walk or talk and exclaim, “He can’t [do whatever]; he’s more like a *baby* than a 20-year-old!” Instead, we can ask, “What will it take? What will he need? How do we need to change

our thinking, or what do we need to change in his home/school/workplace/community?” For we don’t need to change people with disabilities, they’re fine just the way they are. (There have always been people with disabilities in the world and there always will be. And if we live long enough, any of us may become a person with a disability as a result of an accident, illness, or the aging process). We *do* need to change ourselves—how we think, talk, and behave—and when necessary, we need to change the environment (such as modifying a classroom, the curriculum, a job site, or home; and/or providing assistive technology, modifications, supports, etc.).

Within the PRESUMED INCOMPETENT mentality are safety issues and the “get ready” paradigm. If a person isn’t considered ready for [fill-in-the-blank], it’s thought he could be harmed. But think back to when you left your family’s home: *were you ready*? Were you competent to go out on your own? *You* most likely believed you were, but what about *your parents*? They were probably fearful for you, scared you’d fall flat on your face, get in trouble, and more. And maybe you *did* take two steps forward and one step back—and you also learned from your mistakes, found the help you needed from others, picked yourself up, and made it—one way or another! In the process, did you always listen to the wisdom of your parents or others? Probably not—you learned through experience, becoming more and more competent along the way!

Why can’t people with disabilities have those same opportunities? To learn from experience, to dig deep for strength and find resources when the going gets rough, to savor the pleasure of success and the awesome learning opportunities that are borne of failure, and perhaps most importantly, *to belong*.

We can continue to PRESUME INCOMPETENCE; ensure the dependence, helplessness, and isolation of people with disabilities; and maintain an “us/them” society. Or we can *PRESUME COMPETENCE* and create communities where all are valued and included. Which will it be?