

Presuming Competence



A really important concern while interacting with persons with disabilities is what we call “presuming competence.” You might think a person can’t do things, but do not assume that. This is important because while persons with disabilities need support at times, they want to have the opportunity to accomplish things in their lives. Everybody wants to feel confident when it comes to solving problems.

For example, it may be easy for someone to assume that people who have limited speech don’t put much thought into the world. But using other ways to communicate, such as Facilitated or Augmentative Communication, can bust that myth. That person may appear to not understand by first impression when in reality; they are expressing themselves in a different way.



Keep this in mind when you interact with persons with disabilities. When it comes to intelligence, everybody is in their own way. One reason kids with disabilities are not included is because people make false assumptions about their abilities to learn and grow. Doug Biklen said, “The question is no longer who can be included or who can learn, but how can we achieve inclusive education. We begin by presuming competence.”

Comments by Kyle Moriarty

I would say that having people see me as smart is hugely important and works to calm my anxiety. I feel that if you are treated as a person with intelligence you are hope magnified and you will respond in positive ways. I know that being treated like I was unintelligent or illogical was not helpful and caused me a great deal of anxiety. That didn't work!



I want you to know that I am intelligent and have something to say but I was not able to let people know until I was introduced to typing, Facilitated Communication (FC). Erratic times before typing my thoughts, I was seen as not literate, not very likely to be included in regular classes or go to college. Without FC I was expected to rely on broken, habitual speech that was not relevant to anything I really wanted to say. It made me feel like I was not smart. I dealt with a lot of anxiety. Many years past with me taking in information and not being able to share what I knew. I could think and read but no one understood that.



The point here is to label jars not people and to believe in the intelligence. My friend, Tracy Thresher, tells us to presume competence and not limit children to life without hope or purpose. I want more than anything to support others to go with a voice. In having a voice they are able to have a future. Please understand we are all individuals and each one has needs that are as individual as we each are. We need to have options to fit our needs not the other way around.

Story by Tracy Thresher

I am Tracy Thresher. I have been using Facilitated Communication (FC) and having a voice since 1990. Not being able to express myself was like being in a world of silence. I couldn't tell people what I liked and didn't like. People thought that I didn't understand what was being said to me. It was frustrating and made me angry and I withdrew.



The experience of the world looks different from my experience. Most people take their ability to talk for granted and I take my inability to talk quite seriously. I live with it every day – it is always there each time someone wants to read my thoughts.

The impact of learning to speak up and have a voice has been quite meaningful for me. I have typed life goals and dreams that have actually come true. This would never have happened without FC.

Hope is essential for dealing out success. When I first met Kyle I felt his despair and anguish with time lost - he did not have hope. He came to a FC workshop I was helping to teach. Kyle could not enter the room that first day and stayed downstairs the whole time. On the next workshop he came in the room but stood in the back the whole time and on the third day he sat with his team.

The next year Kyle hit the road running. Thoughts that had been trapped inside for years had a place to go. Letting out lost thoughts is moving out of despair into life and fulfilling life's hope. With a strong voice you can move from anguish and lost time darkness into a world of fun and life.



Tips For Presuming Competence

1. Always ask before giving assistance and let the person tell you what you may do to be helpful.
2. Treat adults as adults. Use a typical tone of voice, just as if speaking with a friend or co-worker.
3. In general do not assume a person can't read, but also don't assume they can.
4. Speak to the person directly, not the support person or companion.
5. Don't assume a person who has limited or no speech cannot understand what is being said. People usually understand more than they can express.
6. Never pretend you understand what is said when you don't! Ask the person to tell you again what was said. Repeat what you understand.
7. Do not try to finish a person's sentence, or cut them off. Listen until they have finished talking, even if you think you know what they might say.
8. You might not be able to see someone's disability. There are many disabilities that are hidden within a person.
9. Avoid using stereotypes in your thinking. We all have different personalities and our own ways of doing things. To find out what a person prefers, ask them directly.
10. Offer compliments but avoid giving a lot of praise when people with disabilities do typical things.
11. Most people with disabilities want to help others, as well as be supported, and enjoy making a difference in someone's life.
12. Look for something that indicates a person understands. Respond to any attempt the person makes to communicate.

13. Avoid speaking for others. Encourage a person to speak on their own behalf. If you must restate something, be careful not to change the meaning.
14. Because some people like to please others, it is important to be mindful of your body language, tone of voice, and other gestures that may influence a person's decision.
15. Have your support of the person be low-key, almost "invisible" to others. Don't "over-support."
16. Let a person make their own decisions. Don't take over and make decisions for them. It can be difficult for some of us to make quick decisions. Be patient and allow the person to take their time.
17. Focus on what a person can do. All people want a chance to live a typical life, just like everyone else.
18. Find ways to include a person in a conversation. Do not talk about the person to others as if they're not there.

"If you want to see competence, it helps if you look for it."

–Douglas Biklen