

Developmental Disability Explained

by Dr. Kimberly Mills

Bermuda is an amazing and beautiful country. Some of Bermuda's bragging rights include being a top tourism destination for travelers all across the globe, as well as being a hub for international business and banking. All of these things make us proud to live and work in Bermuda and call this wonderful country our home. This country receives accolades for some of its better known offerings, and I respectfully submit that Bermuda should also receive accolades for the advanced programme for youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and other developmental disabilities found in its third sector charity, Tomorrow's Voices – Bermuda Autism and Early Intervention Centre. Tomorrow's Voices is a global model of excellence and paving the way for a Bermudian society that makes increasingly better efforts to serve its youth and adults with developmental disabilities through research based therapeutic practices, weekend respite programs, consultation to schools and families, training of allied health professionals and advocacy for better service to developmentally disabled populations throughout the country. But just what, you may ask, is a developmental disability? What is the difference between having a different or temporary challenge versus a disability?

According to the Disability Discrimination Act based out of the United Kingdom, a disability is defined as 'a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out day-to-day activities.' Sounds simple enough right? The key factor in distinguishing between a disability and perhaps a temporary impairment is the issue of how chronic and pervasive the impairment is. If for example, you break both legs, this will certainly have substantial and adverse effects. But these effects won't be long-term, therefore would not be considered to be a disability. At some point, the legs will heal and normal walking will be able to be resumed. Generally, disabilities do not go away, although through careful planning, early intervention and the use of research based therapies, we can certainly mitigate some of the adverse outcomes that have historically been associated with having various diagnoses.

Disabilities can be mental such as emotional disabilities like bi-polar disorder or schizophrenia, they may be cognitive disabilities such as learning and intellectual disabilities, and they may be physical such as paralysis, blindness or deafness. They may also be medical when one is diagnosed with having something like Fibromyalgia. The important thing to remember is that it is not the presence of the condition that indicates



a disability. It is the degree to which having the condition limits your ability to interact with the world and actively participate in your own life. A person could have autism and learning challenges, yet because their lives are not adversely impacted by having these conditions, they would be considered to be disabled.

Now that you know what a disability is, what do you need to do if you know or suspect someone of having a disability? Some have argued about whether or not it is important to have a diagnosis. I would argue that a proper diagnosis is very important. A correct diagnosis can make treatment more focused, concerted, targeted and specialized. A diagnosis can provide information and knowledge and knowledge is power. Once you know what you are dealing with, you can seek out the help of professionals, parents and friends or others to help you determine which treatment regimen will be the best for your child or loved one. You can do the research yourself to see what the medical and research experts have determined to be a best practice.

It is helpful to seek out support from online communities and network with other parents, families and friends who have loved ones who have disabilities. You should investigate options and opportunities that already exist within your local community. Respite as an example is available at Tomorrow's Voices every other weekend for less than \$9 an hour. There is a great foundation for disability services already in Bermuda, but it needs to be built up and expanded upon.

Perhaps the most important lesson to learn regarding people with disabilities is this: They want exactly the same things that all human beings want. They want independence, power, and freedom. They want health, happiness and love. They want to learn new things each day and when they are older they want meaningful and satisfying work. And they need the barriers removed that are blocking their ability to experience life and life to the fullest.