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Susan Stanfield is a Co-Director of Spectrum Society and the co-author of two books for people with disabilities and their supporters, as well as several articles related to community living. Susan has presented locally and internationally, and consulted on subjects ranging from plain language to strategic planning.

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Getting to Community:

supporting people with
developmental disabilities in
their pursuit of the good life.

BY SUSAN STANFIELD

BOOK DETAILS & ORDER FORM

Getting to Community: supporting people with developmental disabilities in their pursuit of the good life.

BY SUSAN STANFIELD

For many years, we believed that a good life for someone with a developmental disability involved having lots of services: a residential service, a day program, specialized transportation and recreation services. The human service system expanded rapidly throughout the 1980s and 1990s, fuelled by the assumption that disability-specific services were the key to achieving a good life in community.

In fact, for many people, services had the opposite effect. Instead of being a bridge to community, they replaced it. Services that were intended to be temporary or transitional became permanent. People were on the periphery of community life but somehow separate from it. The service system came to be a kind of closed community unto itself, where tremendous value was placed on paid supports, and relatively little on natural supports. Young people could come into adult services and spend the rest of their lives surrounded by people who were paid to be with them, in environments that were designed especially for them.

The promise of community living wasn't that everyone would have a program. It was that everyone would have a life in community. It was about empowering people with disabilities to become equal citizens, to seize control of their own lives and realize their full potential.

That's not to say people might not need services, or that it's wrong to have paid people in one's life. It's just that services should augment the typical experiences and opportunities that are available to everyone, not replace them. Paid supporters should enhance and support natural relationships like family, friends and neighbours, not supplant them.

Go Natural!

Too often, we defer to the service system as a first response to meeting people's needs, and generic options as a last resort, if at all. What would happen if we turned this around, and looked to generic, or natural options as a first response?

"Susan offers an elegant and precise voice to a new era of supporting interdependence and authentic roles for people with disabilities as they make their own choices in their homes, work places, neighborhoods and associational lives."

This is an informative and practical book that would be an excellent addition to the libraries of teachers in inclusive classrooms, parents and those working in the field.

We expect a great deal from those who support our citizens with disabilities in their daily lives, and this book is a welcome and respectful addition to the field."

Barbara R. Trader, MS
Executive Director,
TASH: Equity, Opportunity, and Inclusion

Natural environment is wherever you or I would perform a given activity. It's the real world, the real setting, as opposed to an artificial one. A high school classroom is the natural environment for teaching teenagers about history; it's not the natural environment for teaching people to buy groceries. In the early days of special education, teachers would simulate a check-out stand in the classroom where students could practice shopping at a pretend store: the idea was that students would learn how to shop in a simulated environment, and then apply their learning in the real world. We now know this approach doesn't work. If you want to teach someone to buy groceries, do it in a real store.

Natural support refers to the people and resources that are already in the natural environment; the ones you or I would access. The information desk is a natural support available to anyone at the mall. If you or I need help finding something at the mall, this is where we go to get our questions answered. We don't have support workers beside us anticipating our every need and answering all our questions. Good facilitation involves steering people toward natural supports whenever possible. The old adage "give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime" comes to mind. Natural supports are all around us, we just need to pay attention – and then get out of the way so they can step in.

Natural cues are what you or I respond to in a given situation. The walk signal is our cue to cross the street. An overflowing garbage can is our cue to take out the trash. Wherever possible we should be helping people to recognize and respond to natural cues, instead of teaching them to wait for a prompt or permission from a support worker. Natural cues can include self-cueing strategies, like writing appointments in a day timer or making "to do" lists. Teaching someone to use a day timer is preferable to having them rely on staff to keep track of their appointments.

Natural reinforcement is – you guessed it – the reinforcement you or I receive in a given situation or for performing a given task. The natural reinforcement for going to work each day is that we get paid. The natural reinforcement for doing our laundry is having clean clothes to wear the next day. Giving someone a gold star for doing their laundry is artificial reinforcement. It's not something that occurs naturally in community. Getting dressed up for a dinner party with friends would be natural reinforcement for doing one's laundry. If artificial reinforcement is used, it should always be paired with natural reinforcement and faded as soon as possible. If the person's only motivation for completing a task is to obtain the artificial reinforcement, then we might want to look for other activities or tasks that are more intrinsically rewarding.

Natural consequence is the response or outcome you or I would expect for the choices we make. The natural consequence for not showing up at work is we don't get paid. The natural consequence for making too much noise in the library is we get asked to leave. You and I don't lose our television privileges if we misbehave – that would be an artificial consequence. Effective support involves helping people to understand the natural consequences of their choices.