

Service, Support and Success

The Direct Support Workers Newsletter**Burritos and Cherry Pies:**

Saying Yes, Saying No: What Direct Support Professionals Need to Think About



By: Dave Hingsburger

“Tell them that they shouldn’t say ‘no’ so much!!”

She shook her finger at me when she spoke those words. We had been chatting and she’d asked me what I was carrying in my hands. I told her that I had a few copies of a newsletter article I’d written for staff. She then told me exactly what I should write about: the word ‘no.’ “They shouldn’t say ‘no’ so much.”

A quick search – isn’t Google wonderful – and I found a study that showed that one-year-old children typically hear the word ‘no’ 400 times a day. Apparently that’s because parents tend to say ‘no’ not as a word but as a phrase, “No, no, no, no, NO!” It’s no wonder that, after being showered with ‘no’s at one, the terrible twos follow.

It’s interesting that one of the greatest frustrations as expressed by many adults with intellectual disabilities is that “People treat me like I’m a little kid.” I think all of us remember saying to our parents, “When I grow up, I’m never going to eat peas again!” That statement is powerfully important. It means that, even at a very young age, we are able to see into the future to a time when our parents won’t have control, won’t be able to say “no” to our wishes, won’t be able to impose their will on ours. Trouble is, kids with disabilities say the same thing – but it’s different. While all grow up, some never reach the point where they can say “no” to peas. Some never reach a time where there isn’t someone with the power to say ‘no’ to them over and over and over again.

We all know, that “No,” isn’t simply an unpleasant experience. It means that we have asked for something, to do something, to participate in something and we have been denied. It’s frustrating. It’s irksome. It’s maddening. It can also feel demeaning because it means that someone else has power over us – the power to forbid, the power to withhold and the power to exclude. These are enormous powers. I’m sure everyone reading this will have had the experience in the last month or so of someone telling you “no” to an idea or a suggestion or a request. Be honest. You didn’t like it. Your reaction probably varied based on who the person was and what power they have. You were probably a lot nicer in your acceptance of “no” to your boss than to your spouse. That’s because they have power, you know it and, most importantly, they know it.

The Burrito Test

With power comes the temptation of tyranny. We can end up saying “no” because we can ... not because we need to. Every time someone asks for permission, for information, for assistance, the imbalance of power becomes greater. Their need of something from you, therefore, exacerbates the already existing hierarchy that comes with the role of support provider.

Have you ever heard of the ‘burrito test?’ I hadn’t until recently when someone posted a comment on my blog regarding the issues of power, control and food. The Burrito Test is stated quite simply, again from the comment on my blog: “Can the resident make and eat a microwave burrito at midnight if they so desire?” This comment has resulted in me having several conversations that I would never have had before. Most people I spoke to, from several different agencies, after careful consideration said the answer would be, in most cases, “No.”

‘No,’ for no reason is the mark of domination.

Avoiding The Power Trap

It’s fair to say than none of us want to be a bully or a tyrant or a dictator ... yet all of us are prey to the corrosive effects of power. The power trap can happen almost without noticing. We’ve found ourselves saying “no” when we didn’t need to and then feel we can’t say “yes” because that would be backing down and give the wrong message. So we are stuck! We shouldn’t have said “no,” but worry about then saying “yes.” There are some things that we can think about regarding our roles that may help.

Facilitating ‘Yes’: Our job isn’t to be a substitute parent whose role is to forbid the people we support from things we deem bad for them or inconvenient for us. Oh, that is exactly what our role once was, but it is no more. Our job is to facilitate as many ‘yesses’ as we can in the course of a day. Big ‘yesses’ and little ‘yesses’ and every other kind there is. It’s not for us to be a ‘no it all’ ... which, when you think about it, is a very good thing.

This is a new way of seeing service; for years people with disabilities were served by people who were taught that people with disabilities needed guidance in EVERYTHING and that their role was to give guidance about EVERYTHING Further, we were taught that if they kicked up a fuss about anything then they were ‘non-compliant’ and we’d bring in specialists to write programmes and protocols to enforce submission to our guidance about EVERYTHING.

Coming to see our job as one of support, not suppression liberates people with disabilities but, without question, it liberates us too. Spending your day listening to someone and working towards their goals, or assisting them to do something they want to do – well, that’s a good way to spend time and it creates a career that can be fondly looked back upon.

So we aren’t parents who control, we’re partners on the journey.

(Note to parents reading this: this section isn’t meant to be anti-parent at all – all of you who have grown up children know that your role as parent changed over the years, parenting children necessitates a lot of ‘no’ situations, but parenting adults presents a lot more ‘support’ situations. It’s that adaption that I’m talking about here.)

Establishing Boundaries: “My life is your job,” could easily be said by anyone receiving supports to anyone giving supports. The job really is about the life and wishes of an individual who we are serving. Would you be angry if your grocery clerk took a cherry pie out of your shopping cart and put it aside because of ... pick one:

- 1) They don't think you should be eating cherry pies.
- 2) They don't like cherry pies and therefore won't sell it to you.
- 3) They have a belief structure that says that cherry pie is sinful and, therefore, won't sell one to you.
- 4) They just aren't in the mood to process a cherry pie today.
- 5) They think, “I'm the one who has to process this pie and pack this pie, which means I get to decide if I want to do either of those things.”
- 6) Cherry pies are just wrong; it should be self-evident why.

None of these things are reasons for the clerk to say ‘no’ to that cherry pie. None! But often we end up “cherry pie-ing” someone for just those reasons. It's important to have boundaries – between what you want and like (which is great on your own time) and what a person you are supporting wants and likes (which has NOTHING to do with you). Keeping that boundary is important but it's difficult because ...

We Work in People's Homes, We Work in People's Workplaces: When your workplace has a living room and a kitchen, it starts to feel like home ... your home ... and this is dangerous. It's really hard to have boundaries when it becomes ‘just like a second home.’ It's never a second home because YOU DON'T LIVE THERE ... you work there. A very smart Executive Director once said to me that there is a constant struggle between members and staff because they try to organize their home as their home – with all that means and staff are constantly trying to arrange their workplace as their workplace – with all that means and many clashes result because of those opposing views of the same space. When I mentioned this to another really smart Executive Director, she said that she thought there was another struggle between staff who know how home should be and what things should be done in that home who run into members with disabilities who also know what should be done in that home and what home behaviours are acceptable. I think they are both right. We've got to get it ... home is home.

In workplaces it's slightly different. We can end up ‘cherry pie-ing’ someone simply because we think we have a right to comment on every aspect of their lives. It's interesting that people who work in day programs often say, “That's not appropriate in a work environment,” about one or another thing in regards to those who attend those programs. However, they seem only to notice when the person attending is being inappropriate – never noticing that commenting on someone's lunch or saying an arbitrary ‘no’ to someone's choice of snack or break time snoozing is something that supervisors don't get to do ‘in the workplace.’

Some Questions to Ask Yourself

1) What's the point of my 'no' ... is it power or is there purpose? Certainly there are things that we have to say 'no' to (though how we do it will be the subject of the next point) because they can or will do harm. But it's important when something is requested of you – a thing or a service – it's really important to stop and think about what your answer is going to be --- if it's a thing or a service --- then there has to be a really good reason to say 'no' and 'not wanting to do it right now' isn't a good enough reason. Ask yourself if your supervisor asked you to do the same thing, would you do it? If the answer is 'yep' well then, your supervisor just did ask you.

2) When I am going to refuse – how do I do it? While it's true that we work for people with disabilities, we also work for our employer. We often have duties that need to be performed at particular times, we often have to balance out our duties in respect to the other people we serve. Often, perhaps even most often, our 'no' doesn't mean 'no' ... it most often means "yes, later ..." or "yes, after ..." or "yes, when ..." There is a hugely different emotional response to a provisional 'yes' than a definitive 'no' isn't there? Make it clear that what is requested is going to happen sometime in the immediate future. It's important not to use these phrases as a distraction technique – hoping that the person will forget what they'd asked for. If someone wants to go to Tim Hortons for a coffee, saying 'yes, later' means YES, LATER. It doesn't mean 'yes but I hope you'll forget about it.' Prove yourself by reminding the person about their request and then take them later, just as you promised.

3) Am I right thinking? When the person is asking for a service that makes you uncomfortable – going to a particular faith worship service, going to a gay pride event, going to a hair salon where you've once dated and then broken up with one of the stylists and said you'd never step foot anywhere near them again – it's important to do 'right thinking.' You are not going to that service, that pride event, that salon. (To those shaking your head right now: No you aren't). What you are doing is supporting someone who is going there. You aren't at the service, at the event or giving business to the salon, you are supporting someone who is ... at the service, at the event, at the salon. Right thinking is understanding what you are doing and differentiating that from what you aren't doing. Getting it right makes it easy to do what's right.

4) Do you 'no' yourself? When you say 'no' to someone who is choosing to just relax instead of doing dishes – do you make the same decision, do you give yourself freedoms that you are not allowing another individual? It's entirely possible that some of us are trying to make people with disabilities into the people we wish we were, but aren't. Whoa! Your frustrations with your inability to diet, to keep a neat house, to be on time for everything shouldn't result in people with disabilities paying for it. If you give yourself a break, consider passing the favour along.

5) Put the expression ‘cherry pie-ing into your vocabulary and use it with your team: The term ‘cherry pie-ing’ became part of team slang with a group of people I worked with over 30 years ago. It was in a summer job I had with kids given a label no longer used. One of us forbade an extra piece of cherry pie to one of the kids, just because he could. A huge debate and discussion took place at the next team meeting and the term ‘cherry pie-ing’ became part of our group culture. It meant, obviously, that someone was frivolously saying ‘no’ to something just because they could. It was a humorous way for us to remind ourselves about the power we had and the power we shouldn’t have. And, “Don’t you think you can go around cherry pie-ing me!” is an awesome thing to say in a spat with a coworker or, in my case, boyfriend.

6) Make it a goal to pass the ‘Burrito test’ from henceforth. The other day I was in a MacDonald’s and heard a man, older than me, with an intellectual disability order ‘pie and fries’ for breakfast. He was with a few of his friends – not a staff in sight. Even though I could feel the earth move as nutritionists spun in their graves, I felt glad of the freedom that that order represented. I know there will be heads shaking as I use this example. Some of you who know me or who have seen me lecture might think that my own weight and my own diet may be influencing my celebration of his ‘bad food choice.’ But I’m not celebrating a bad food choice; I’m celebrating a freely made decision – the stuff of adulthood.

And I admit – I dearly hoped it was cherry pie.

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