

Navigating the Heart During Stormy Weather: Pastoral Care for Persons with Disabilities

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Abstract

Individuals with developmental disabilities are predominately taught appropriate alternatives to maladaptive behavior by means of behavior modification. *Gentle Teaching* embraces relationship building—the antithesis of behaviorism. This exploration of social justice details a progressive design for a child’s future as a valued individual: safe, loved, engaged, and loving; and proposes the integration of method and principle, in teaching and caring for the whole child. The framework of *Gentle Teaching* can facilitate this process and cultivate a deeper understanding of healthy, spiritual, development. Recovering an individual’s sense of value is challenging, especially during crisis. The presenter will discuss a method of developing companionship and mentoring a spirit of gentleness, and demonstrate an unlimited, cross-disciplinary tool by which to do so. This information is based on extensive study of *Gentle Teaching*, related literature/research, consultation with practicing GTI (Gentle Teaching International) mentors, successfully using these principles, and the presenter’s ongoing experience.

Although great work has been done to identify and assess cognitive abilities, exhibited behaviors, and environmental factors affecting individuals with developmental disabilities, limited work has been done to identify the individual’s quality of life and the impact that teaching based on quality of life factors has on his/her development. As such, we miss *how* we need to teach the child and focus on *what* we need to teach, ignoring the need to build a relational foundation of learning for that child. If we focus on modifying a child’s behavior with punishment or reward, we miss the opportunity to strengthen the child’s environment to better support and nurture social and emotional growth. We must realign our methods in order to impact the healthy spiritual development of the child by incorporating an alternative means of teaching, creating meaning from existence, and building unconditional relationships which address the whole child: mind, body, and spirit, to secure the child’s quality of life.

In this presentation, we will present the framework of Gentle Teaching as a method of relating which promotes learning and spiritual development. We will discuss the eight values of Gentle Teaching and how they relate to a child's quality of life. We will then present a "crisis cycle" of development which we call the "nine destinations" and provide concrete example of how using the principles of Gentle Teaching during the nine destinations can promote a child's quality of life and spiritual development.

Quality of Life

It is important to identify that 'quality' refers to the experience an individual has on a daily basis. Our goal is to facilitate a high quality of life for the individual, which includes positive involvement in meaningful activities and engagement with others. The individual may experience times of difficulty, but quality of life is the balance of all these meaningful experiences. In addition, we must acknowledge the individual's basic values. These values are different for everyone, and the way in which one child or family defines them will be different from that of another. We must recognize the child's personal expression of his/her values and offer support.

Meaning and Relationality

"Meaning making," as explained by Kegan (1982) and Fowler (1981), provides opportunity to exist unconditionally. The result is internal contentment. The two Chinese characters which represent crisis are that of danger and opportunity. Danger enhances the conditional, lending purpose to contrary actions. Opportunity allows progression *without* condition. Concurrently, the Whiteheads suggest that an alternative to aggression depression, shame, and guilt associated

with a structure of reward and punishment, i.e. external condition, is to be aware of unhealthy actions, befriending potential attention seeking, escaping, tangible, or sensory needs, by a process of “naming and taming.” This coexistence of the internal and external selves is ‘meaning.’ It is the blessing, or gift, of developing the healthy spiritual self. Meaning is brought by relationship.

Relationality, as suggested by Martin Buber, is “true interaction [which] emerges in ‘the space between’ ...where self and other are inseparable” (Buber 1981). Over the past 10 years it has been our practice to focus on this most pure relationship, nurturing quality of life, building a sense of companionship, and formulating community through the framework of *Gentle Teaching* (Casey, et.al. 1982; McGee, et.al. 1987, McGee, 1989, 1998; McGee & Menolascino, 1991). In order to do so, we have created our own assessments and progress tools to study this theory. Initially, it is essential that we understand the foundation of *our selves* through ten themes:

- We reflect on how we use our *hands, eyes, words, and presence* (our “tools”) to interact with the child with a developmental disability
- We learn to “read” the child as *active* listeners
- We *prevent* crisis situations when possible and *respond with warmth* when they occur
- We realize that instead of forming contracts and rewards, we are building a relationship that is *unconditional*
- We understand that our interaction is not based on being a client or professional, but on being human beings in search of *companionship* throughout this transformation
- We *engage* in meaningful interaction instead of being disengaged or superficial
- We focus on becoming *flexible* within our interaction
- We create *new moral memories* which form feelings of self-worth for the individual

- We communicate clearly with *concrete* words.
- We realize that our purpose is to build a *relationship* rather than to modify the individual's behavior.

Gentle Teaching

Gentle Teaching's philosophical roots are evident in many works, including those of Carl Rogers, Jean Vanier, and Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa's statement, "For it is not what we give, but how much love we put into the giving" defines the role and responsibility that we have to teach the child to feel safe and loved, therefore valued, as we begin to enter into that child's existence. Rudolph Dreikurs stated, "until I can risk appearing imperfect in your eyes, without fear that it will cost me something, I can not really learn from you." *Gentle Teaching* applies the most basic humanistic principles to learning: feeling safe and loved, and creating the foundation for the child to identify that "I am because you exist." Unconditional valuing nurtures the child's intrinsic motivation and sense of self-worth, eliminating the tendency to devalue and diminish the primary goal of relationship-building. When we use our hands, eyes, words, and presence as "tools," we recognize that it is not *what* we are teaching that is important, but *how* we teach. This is especially critical during times of crisis.

Our framework of valuing, teaching, and protecting is built upon the foundation of four important moralities:

"My friend, when you are with us, you are safe. These hands will never hurt you. These words will not put you down. These eyes will look warmly and lovingly at you."

"You are not only safe with us, you are loved! Our love is unconditional!"

"Learn that it is good to be with us, do things with us, and even do things for others!"

“Learn to be loving toward others!”

Safe, loved, engaged, and loving are the cornerstones of quality of life services, which have been adapted from McGee (1998).

The Eight Basic Human Values of Gentle Teaching

John McGee, at the Gentle Teaching International Institute, employs a philosophy for creating companionship and community to enhance one’s quality of life. He has identified eight quality of life values: bodily integrity, feeling safe, feeling self-worth, having a life structure, a sense of belongingness, social participation, having meaningful daily activities, and inner contentment (McGee, 1998).

Table 1.

Eight Basic Human Values

Value	Description
Bodily Integrity	Being healthy, being decently clothed, being clean, being well-fed, etc.
Feeling Safe	Wanting to be with others, not being afraid of people with whom you live, not being afraid to go outside, feeling relaxed in interactions with others, etc.
Feeling Self-Worth	Seeing oneself as good, being recognized as a person, feeling pride, expressing personal gifts and talents
Having a Life Structure	Sensing a life-plan, having a daily routine, having your own rituals and beliefs
A Sense of Belongingness	Having a close circle of friends, loving others and being loved by others, having a home, feeling companionship
Social Participation	Being able to have contact with the community, living between others, partaking of community life
Having Meaningful Daily Activities	Enjoying one’s daily activities, having activities that fit into your life-plan
Inner Contentment	Feeling inner harmony, free from traumatic experiences

A child's quality of life does not depend on each separate value, but on their sum. Our responsibility is to nurture a foundation on which the child may grow and expand to develop a healthy expression of all of these values.

The quality of life values are not hierarchical, but can be arranged as destinations in a child's spiritual development, either in crisis or in the formation of companionship. Instead of a crisis cycle that focuses on an individual's behavior, the destinations emphasize change starting with the caregiver. Mattis and Jagers (2001) noted that the vast majority of conceptualization and research, in the area of spirituality has emphasized the individual's "quest" over the social and relational context of spiritual development. Roehlkepartain (2004) identified that many conceptualizations of spirituality have been highly focused on individual experience and impact, thus neglecting the ecological dimension of spiritual development. The destinations below draw on the principles of Gentle Teaching, the ten themes of relationship-based interaction, and a commitment to unconditionality to nurture the social and relational element of a child's spiritual development.

Destinations: The Process

Initially, our role as teachers, caregivers, and parents is to facilitate meaningful activities that address the individual's quality of life. We create daily rituals with activities of value so that there is purpose to the individual's day. The caregiver's role is to be a gift-giver, bringing a commitment to each activity and conveying to the child "you are a blessing!" Creating a structure of daily rituals lays a foundation for who the person is, identifies purpose for being with others, and brings meaning to the time shared with others. This is the first step toward the caregiver becoming a companion who is walking side by side on the journey.

In the second destination, the caregiver continues to facilitate meaningful activities but now with the focus of recognizing and nurturing the individual's sense of self. The individual's self-worth emerges from repeated engagement in activities that have value. Engagement between the caregiver and individual draws out the individual's likes and dislikes and paints a picture of "who am I" for the individual. It is important that the caregiver nurtures this awareness with the goal of building a sense of community together because disregard for the child's unique expression of participation prevents the child from recognizing his/her own worth. The individual's growing recognition of his/her internal feelings lays a foundation for intrinsic motivation and is a step toward building a bridge with others.

As the individual's self-awareness grows, he/she begins to recognize the caregiver as a companion in the journey towards building community. Out of habit or ease, the caregiver may be tempted to act as a *provider* and to do things *for* the child. However, the caregiver's role is to participate *with* the child and to be a *bridge-builder* to help the child feel connected to others. If we fail to nurture a sense of belonging for the child, the child experiences disconnectedness, which we may see through his/her behaviors and actions. While engaging with the child, the caregiver uses his/her tools (presence, eyes, words, and hands) to convey to the child that he/she is safe and loved.

A child may *be* safe and loved long before he/she *feels* safe and loved. While the absence of this feeling leads to a stronger sense of disconnect, we can instead nurture this feeling with warm interactions and participation in meaningful rituals. At this destination, the child recognizes that

he/she is safe with the caregiver and unconditionally loved by the caregiver. From this recognition, the child feels a deeper sense of connectedness to the caregiver, and it is the caregiver's role is to be present and non-judgmental to allow the child to explore his/her feelings.

At this destination, what the child desires most is inner contentment. When coming from a state of disconnect and frustration, the child seeks inner contentment as a resolution. When growing in one's feeling of being safe and loved, the child seeks inner contentment as the step of internalizing this feeling. Once the individual recognizes that he/she is safe with the caregiver, he/she longs for inner harmony and freedom from traumatic stress.

This destination is the turning point toward peace and resolution. As the child seeks companionship, it is the caregiver's job to approach the child with open arms and to try to connect with the child. This moment of change is the beginning of a new moral memory filled with inner harmony and acceptance of each other.

The caregiver and child are now present together to build on the foundation of inner contentment and to create a true meaning of companionship. Companionship is an interdependent state, where both parties recognize that "I am because you exist." This reflection of oneself in the other forms a deeper understanding between the caregiver and the child. The caregiver's role is to be present with the child and to create teachable moments to support the child's growth and development, and this engagement lays the foundation for mutual valuing.

Mutual valuing is a state of respect, recognition that it is good to be together and to do things together, and unconditional acceptance between the caregiver and the child. As caregivers, we must assess how we are using our tools to convey valuing with warmth and flexibility. Valuing does not mean that we focus on changing the child’s behavior, but rather on nurturing the relationship as a foundation for learning.

This final destination is the goal of our relationship, creating companionship through meaningful rituals. From the relationship that has been built, we can now expand into new and different areas of doing things together. We draw others in to expand the individual’s community, we continue to nurture the individual’s possibilities and vulnerabilities as we work toward quality of life, and we continue on the journey toward unconditional love.

Spiritual Development Implications

In the spiritual development of a child, these nine destinations become the foundation for relationship with God, relationship with others, internalization of spirituality, and continuing spiritual growth. The following is an example of a crisis situation for a young boy, Anthony, who does not want to go to Church (Table 2).

Table 2.

A Sample Progression of the Nine Destinations

Destination	Sample Progression
<p>1: <i>A Life Plan of Faith Through Daily Structure with Rituals With Value:</i> We must understand that the purpose is to create companionship, and through this journey of faith, we help to identify that one has a purpose thru meaningful rituals and a life of structure.</p>	<p>Anthony finds laughter and exuberance as he holds his brother’s hand while we begin to pray and ask God for His blessing before partaking in our Sunday breakfast.</p>

<p>2: <i>Sense of Self-Worth</i>: Continuously helping one to be engaged in meaningful rituals in relationship with God, one begins to see one's self-worth through the teaching of Christ.</p>	<p>Anthony begins to enjoy his breakfast, and with every bite, "Let's not go to church" becomes his dialogue of knowing his Sunday ritual.</p>
<p>3: <i>Sense of Belongingness</i>: One begins to see themselves as being connected as we continue to engage or focus on building the relationship with a true sense of faith through our Christian community.</p>	<p>As we allow Anthony to express his "dislikes," connecting him with his feelings, we also identify that we are going to church together as a family.</p>
<p>4: <i>Feeling Safe and Loved</i>: At this destination the individual feels safe and loved through many meaningful rituals that laid the foundation of unconditional love.</p>	<p>As Anthony continues to express his feelings about not going to church, he then becomes enraged and throws himself on the kitchen floor. He screams and yells at his parents.</p>
<p>5: <i>Laying the Foundation for Inner Contentment</i>: Many interactions with meaningful rituals that focus on building the relationship compared to compliance or accomplishing the ritual creates the moral memory that is needed for the child to feel free of traumatic stress.</p>	<p>Anthony begins to experience feelings that his parents do not care for him. He does not feel safe with his parents and seeks the family room sofa with his blanket to feel safe. Anthony looks around, then begins to sob.</p>
<p>6: <i>Opening The Door</i>: As a child begins to look for his/her harbor, we must open it with love and with our presence.</p>	<p>At this point, Anthony's mother with her warm presence walks over to Anthony and sits by him without saying a word. She kindly and gently reaches out to Anthony with her palms open, inviting him to come join her and his family in finishing up breakfast. Anthony smiles at his mother and understands that his family does care about him. Together they walk back into the kitchen and finish up breakfast.</p>
<p>7: <i>Being Present to Build on the Foundation</i>: As the child spends time with us, he/she begins to understand that "I am because you exist."</p>	<p>Anthony and his family clean up the kitchen together as a family. They decide to play a game as a family before going upstairs to get ready for church.</p>
<p>8: <i>Valuing</i>: This is the goal of our relationship, valuing each other as we teach each other that it is good to be together and it is good to do things together.</p>	<p>Anthony and his family finish playing their game together. Before they walk upstairs, Anthony's father asks him about the things he would like to do today. His father listens to his ideas and suggests that they sit together and plan the rest of their day as a family.</p>
<p>9: <i>Safe and Loved with Meaningful Activities to Expand the Foundation</i>: This is the goal of our relationship, creating companionship and a sense of community thru meaningful rituals.</p>	<p>Anthony's family has acknowledged the things that he would like to do and have all sat down together and planned their day. Anthony is smiling, as he now knows what his day will involve and what his family will</p>

be doing with him today. He is dressed in his church clothes, along with his younger brother. His family leaves the house and drives to church listening to Anthony's music as engage in another ritual of singing favorite songs and going to church as a family to thank God.

Conclusion

We are all created in God's image and we are all on individual spiritual journeys. The current models of spiritual development for a child with a developmental disability fail to account for the whole picture of the child's quality of life. The framework of Gentle Teaching and, in particular, these nine destinations of spiritual development bring meaning to a child's spirituality through unconditionality, meaning and relationship.

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