

# ***Service, Support and Success:***

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#### **Counterfeit Criminality: Cautions in Community Living**

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Derek Bentley, a teenager with an intellectual disability, ended his life on the gallows. Though he was executed in the early 1950's, the circumstances of his life still stand as stark warning for what can and will go wrong for someone with a disability trying to make a place for themselves in the community. Derek, early on, was tricked by his non-disabled peers into criminal behaviour, they would leave him to 'take the fall' while they made off unpunished. Even with these experiences he seemed to lack the social skills to move himself out of criminal or gang culture.

I thought of Derek recently when doing a workshop for teens with intellectual disabilities. They were a fun group and enjoyed the training. I noticed a distinct lack of 'belonging' for these kids and a desperate need for 'acceptance' from non-disabled peers. I had a chilling feeling that these kids were headed for trouble as their need for peer approval seemed to outweigh any other consideration. Afterwards, when I asked the host, he told me that many of these kids, especially the boys, were already 'known to the police' and often were 'used' by their peers. He told me that the 'peers' referred to were those who were loosely organized into gangs connected either to drugs or crime.

Later I was downtown and saw a couple of the boys who had been in my workshop hanging with other youths, laughing and joking, distracting others as drugs were being sold in the parking lot.. It seemed to me then that the tolerance for social deviance – as would be the case with poorer social skills – is much greater within criminal groups. In fact, poor social skills, may even be valued by these groups which seem to have their own 'norms'. Even with only a few minutes observation it was possible to see how those with disabilities were easily 'marked' by the others for their desperate need to be included and their naïve trust in their membership, as equals, in the group.

As early as 1804 the phenomenon of someone's disability being used in by 'a criminal element' for gain has part of our social landscape. Dickens, a chronicler of social ills, wrote a book, *Barnaby Rudge*, which had as a major plot point a man with an intellectual disability being

tricked into criminal misbehavior. For those that read crime fiction, the manipulation of people with intellectual disabilities by other criminals, or indeed the police, is a well known plot device.

Clearly, the understanding that people with intellectual disabilities face dangers that arise out of the disability itself has been around for a long time and is well established in the public mind. There are clearly dangers that are peculiar to disability and therefore need to be addressed when considering 'self protection' or 'abuse prevention' strategies that are necessary to live well and successfully in the community. Without addressing them, people with disabilities can be drawn into a 'counterfeit criminality' in which criminal behaviour is performed for reasons other than criminality or criminal gain. Reasons like 'group membership or acceptance', 'need to please peers,' 'misunderstanding of the motives of others,' 'inability to see a set-up.'

Here are some ideas for ensuring that people with disabilities both have safe places for socialization and the development of social networks and friendships as well as some tips for teaching and training to lessen the possibility that someone might engage in 'counterfeit criminality':

#### 1) Disability, Dangers and Defense

To begin at the beginning we need to recognize that people with intellectual disabilities, like everyone else, have a need to belong and a need for group membership. Many people with disabilities haven't ever had 'disability specific' training. While someone in a wheelchair is taught to navigate their physical world, people with intellectual disabilities are never taught to navigate their social world. Learning, first, that others may trick and manipulate, that others may use their disabilities against them, that others may pretend acceptance to get compliance, that others may demand loyalty but not offer it back. These are hard lessons, true, but if people with disabilities want to live successfully in the community, they need to be taught. Though it's not much talked about it parents will admit that they teach their daughters different safety skills than their sons. Both girls and boys face dangers, but they are different and come from different sources. Well the same is true for people with disabilities, they need different safety skills than do their non-disabled peers.

#### 2) Self Advocacy

The self advocate movement is a natural starting point for people with disabilities to come together both to learn and to socialize. Unfortunately, it seems that the self advocate movement has often been limited, often by others, as to the form it takes. While the traditional self advocate groups serve an important, even vital, purpose. Talking about oppression, need for change, developing voice and leadership – all are important.

However, these groups attract only those self advocates who are interested in the ‘politics of disability’. In our organization we’ve had self advocates come forward with a wish to form other self-advocacy groups and now we have an LGBT group as well as a group which advocates for more social activities and sets up events for others to attend. A range of options in self advocacy can be a place for people to go, meet, have fun and find a place to belong. Within all minority communities there are a breadth of activities and social groups – from political groups to groups that play baseball. Our fear of ‘segregated’ activities may distract us from noticing that all minority groups organize themselves in such a way that a variety of options are available. Choice in membership, rather than forced membership, is what matters.

### 3) Social Skills Practice Opportunities

People with disabilities need to have opportunities to practice social skills in a safe environment. Often when people are going off to a social event, a dance, a movie with friends, a dinner with family – they don’t have any opportunities to practice the kinds of social skills that work in those environments. Many environments have ‘situation specific’ social skills and these can be practiced in a fun way as part of getting ready to be in that place or in that environment. One fellow made a really significant social mistake because he thought that the range of acceptable behaviour at a rock concert was much wider than it actually was. A staff who attends similar concerts was able to review with him what was and what was not acceptable in those situations. Given that the staff and the person with a disability had similar interests and spoke a similar language about concerts – they were able to laugh while talking about the ‘rules’.

### 4) Disability, Dangers and the Skills to Discriminate

It is important that people with intellectual disabilities develop self esteem that is based on self knowledge. Understanding disability – becoming proud of oneself as a person with a disability – is the foundation for learning how to be wary and careful. Knowing that people may seek to trick you or manipulate you because they perceive you as being ‘vulnerable’ to their schemes or charms is an important basis for decision making. Most people with disabilities are very aware that others have swindled their money, shortchanged them, tricked them into giving up things. It’s one step further to take that knowledge and turn it into skill. We’ve all learned the maxim, ‘if something is too good to be true, it probably is’ ... many people with disabilities need to learn the exact same thing. Learning to discriminate when one might be being ‘played’ and developing a strategy of ‘delay’ will help someone get out of a difficult situation. Gaining time gives people an opportunity to think, without being under pressure, or to ask the advice or assistance from someone that they trust.

## 5) Friendship Skills Training

Many people with disabilities have had some basic ‘Social Skills Training’ and have learned some general principles of social skills. Likeability is a bit different – learning the skills that make one an attractive person for friendship, or love relationships is quite different. Understanding how to make conversation at a dinner table may result from social skills training – how to turn conversation into friendship is something very different. There are 10 basic skills necessary in order for someone to be likable – luckily these skills are teachable. (Lynn, Beattie and Hingsburger, 2011) They just need to be taught.

## 6) Isolation Awareness

The social isolation of people with intellectual disabilities is pandemic, so much so that it can be hard to spot in an individual. Staff may become so immune to the lifestyle of isolation and loneliness that they don’t even notice it happening. For those who support individuals who live on their own or in SIL (Semi Independent Living) programmes, it is important to be aware if someone has a limited social network or if they are being drawn into social contact with trouble makers or a criminal milieu. Be proactive in assisting the individual in finding social networks based on similar interests or passions, step up support and assist with teaching skills or developing relationships. Some people will do anything to avoid another night alone – anything – and that’s a dangerous situation to be in.

## Conclusion

Derek Bentley’s hanging, for a murder he didn’t commit, led to outrage that, in part, was responsible for the abolishment of capital punishment in Great Britain. His story was turned into a movie, ‘Let Him Have It,’ which is still widely available. His story, tragic as it is, stands as a warning regarding the social dangers that face young people in particular with intellectual disability. A longing for belonging can give others tremendous powers over an individual’s will. Derek’s disability wasn’t so much his difficulty with learning, it’s that he wasn’t taught what he needed to learn.

The goal of community living was to close institutions and have people live lives of value and participation in the community. It would be tragic that people with disabilities end up living in prisons or detention centers simply because they failed to find community within community. It’s important that service providers be aware that people with disabilities need to develop skills and defenses against making mistakes that could cost them their freedom.

## References

Lynn, C., Beattie, K. and Hingsburger, D. (2011) Like ability: learning the how of relationships. *Exceptional Family*, Volume 6. No. 3 p. 40-42