

Importance of Training for Independent Living

-Ms. Donna Francis

Independent Living can seem like such a daunting and sometimes unattainable goal when thinking of children with special needs. However in my experience, with the right mind-set, training and support, it can be achieved.

I was born with a rare growth condition which meant that none of my joints had formed properly. I would be small my whole life, have pain every day, have hearing and mobility problems. People may say that someone with this condition would not be able to live a normal life that they would struggle and not be able to achieve like others without the condition. However at every turn throughout my life, I have proved this to be untrue. This is mainly due to my supportive family. A family that encouraged me to try new things and did not wrap me up in cotton wool. Instead, they let me spread my wings and fly.

So how was this achieved? From the start we were told at home, 'there is no such word as CAN'T'. This is so important when encouraging independent living. If we tell our children 'you can't do this, you can't do that' and do not give them the chance to try new things they will never be able to learn to be independent. We must accept, there may be some things that our children may never do. I knew, I was never going to be a firefighter or an air hostess but there was plenty of other things I could do such as be a teacher, a counsellor, a friend, a supportive person. I was given opportunities to try out things, was given chores to do at home and was taught how to accept myself as I am.

As family is so important I asked my Mum, Dad and sister if they could contribute to this article, here are their words on training for independent living:

My sister, Sharon:

I feel very grateful to be part of a family that saw Donna first as a person and then her disability. I feel that being her older sister, gave me the freedom to be able to make sure that Donna was asked to do chores etc. the same as I had to!!! Which big sister wants her younger sister to get away without doing chores!!! I remember one day being asked to help with the dishes after dinner but Donna wasn't. I complained about this and asked why Donna couldn't help. The response was that she couldn't reach, so I suggested that she sit on a high stool so that she could reach. This was put in place and from then on we both helped with the dishes after dinner.

I believe that to train a child to be independent you have to first see the child and focus on what they can do and how resources around you can be best used to help that child be independent before saying that they can't.

My parents:

From an early age it was clear that it would do Donna no favours to wrap her up in cotton wool. The world would prove to be a tough place for her, so we treated her as we did Sharon. Donna was always of a strong/independent nature. We allowed her to make her own decisions, never saying, 'you can't do that' but rather saying, 'have a go'. Donna is the only one who knows her pain levels and limitations.

On the occasions when she did go beyond her capabilities, we were there to pick up the pieces. As with most children, Donna learnt the hard way.

As a Mother I felt that I should help Donna accept herself as she is so that other people's negativity would not affect her so much.

Training for independent living is for life. If we start early enough then it will have a lasting impact on the child's life. It will become normal for them to do chores, be able to make decisions for themselves and be expected to contribute to family life. It is also important for parents to encourage independent living so that the child does not rely on their parents for so long or for as much.

Encouraging independent living is about going at the child's pace, starting with small steps and building upon that. How can we expect someone to run a race if they cannot walk yet. There is a saying, 'walk before you can run'. This needs to be applied to training for independent living. One way this can be accomplished is by setting goals for your child. Goal setting is important for anyone but especially for families who have a disabled child. How will we know what the child is capable of unless we set goals for that child? Start with small goals and work your way up.

It is important to bear in mind that we need to be realistic about what our children can do. You may not know what your child can do until you start setting goals and seeing if the goals are realistic or not.

It is important to get the whole family involved in the training so that everyone knows what is expected of the child and that no one does anything for the child that they should be doing themselves. Everyone needs to be consistent in supporting and encouraging the child to reach their goals and to become as independent as they can.

I want to leave you with one final thought, I believe that everyone has potential and nobody should be told, 'you can't do that'. As long as we have that encouragement and belief, we can find a way of doing the things we want.