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How Important “R” Life Skills Anyway?

By Karen Kaplan

After returning from the island of Bali, Indonesia where the rice terraces are not just beautiful at sunrise and sunset but are the life line to the Balinese existence. This beautiful natural resource requires very specialized skills to maintain. Rice field workers must have good communication skills, planning skills, problem solving skills, strength, endurance, motor planning, cooperation, a sense of time and knowledge about budgeting and salesmanship. Observing the activities in the rice fields at first dawn or at sunset reminded me of how important teaching life skills were in every culture.

Bali was not just about enjoying the beauty of rice fields or walks along white and black sand beaches or hiking in mountain areas, it was about helping centers understand people with special needs and the importance of teaching life skills (meaningful skills that help each of us become a positive and healthy community member) to this very special community of people.

I wanted to help centers understand how important teaching life skills really was so I engaged centers in discussions around how to develop their own life skills programs so they would implement them consistently and with total commitment. In every culture there are a set of roles that people may assume in their life time (a child, a friend, a student, a volunteer, a worker, a mother, father, grandparent, aunt, uncle, husband, wife etc.) Each of these roles has its own set of skills & expectations that become the goals we must reach in order to assume and perform these roles effectively. These lay the foundation for our Life Skills programs.

Still, in every culture there seems to be a huge emphasis on the acquisition of academic skills and learning in a classroom with four walls and tables or desks. Our students must pass Algebra, design a Power Point, learn how to Word Process, read great literature, poetry and prose, complete courses in statics and know the history of the United States and the world. So our teachers and school systems build curriculums around these skills.

What about team work, cooperation, problem solving, effective hygiene, functional math, effective communication, domestic skills, positive work ethics, sexuality awareness, safety or social skills? When are these skills considered important to learn and why aren't these curriculums just as important to develop? Why is it we wait to address these others skills that promote independence, positive self-esteem and reciprocity: skills that are critical for leading a meaningful life but focus on geometry?

I believe that educational programs for children with special needs are incomplete without addressing the area of life skills. I suggest it be a critical discussion occurring early in the child's educational programming.

I suggest parents and teachers think about **ALL** the roles a student may see themselves in during his or her life and think of all the skills required to execute those roles and then find the commonalities and ensure that a special needs program include goals, opportunities, activities and curriculum teaching them.

I suggest we start early and provide opportunities long before mastery is expected. Then we structure the learning, identify the accommodations needed and develop important supports to maximize learning outcomes in these areas as well.

I suggest that we remember, *always*, that a person can have excellent reading skills, excellent technology skills, calculate math problems on a sheet of paper and complete a research paper, but if they cannot socially problem solve, understand how to budget and save their money, obtain a job and work with others, know how to obtain health services, repair and maintenance services or understand hygiene expectations, they will have huge limitations maintaining a positive adult life. They may also then require round the clock support to access their own community, which can become extremely costly and challenging.

There are many resources to help guide families and teachers in the development of life skills curriculums but it doesn't require a fancy approach to begin early requiring a child to share, complete home chores, participate in his/her own hygiene needs, dress and complete food preparation as well as many other life skill activities.

I am not willing to accept that there isn't at least **ONE** action in every life skill activity a child can learn to do with your expectation, guidance and patience. We just have to make it our priority.

Life Skills Begin When Life Begins

They only wait for us to *nurture* them into full effectiveness

Resources:

Brigance Transition Skills Inventory, Curriculum Associates P.O. Box 2001, North Billerica, MA 01862

Life Skills Activities for Special Children, Second Edition, Darlene Mannix, Jossey-Bass,
www.josseybass.com

Tasks Galore/For the Real World, www.tasksgalore.com

How to Teach Life Skills to Kids with Autism or Aspergers, Jennifer McIlwee Myers, Future Horizons publishers, www.fhautism.com

Taking Care of Myself by Mary Wrobel, Future Horizons, Inc publishers www.fhautism.com

