

“Special needs,” as currently defined in the western hemisphere, includes an abundance of issues, such as medical, behavioral, mental health, developmental and learning issues. Having spent 35 years working with various special needs populations, I became aware of the language changes from the “handicapped” and “disabled” to the “mentally and physically challenged” and eventually “special needs.” At the time I thought it was just marvelous except for one problem ... I cautioned that if special needs is about equal access but eventually leads to special privileges, we would have “special” problems.

Almost 40 years have passed, and it appears that is the direction we have taken as evidenced by the latest. “SAD” (Seasonal Affective Disorder) occurs for some when they don’t get enough sunlight in the winter and get depressed ... so much so that employees are suing employers over the lack of windows in their offices and more vacation time in the winter. I like to refer to this as “the death of common sense.” But that’s me and my reaction to the frivolity of it all. **Please ... Give me a break!**

If you ever noted and studied the criteria to diagnose a learning disability, you’ll be able to diagnose yourself with a learning disability. There are about seven different criteria. Each of us would find at least one in which we could be classified as “learning disabled.”

“Growing up” in this field I came to learn the particular developmental disabilities. There are four: Mental Retardation, Cerebral Palsy, Autism, and Epilepsy. These are true handicapping and challenging issues. The other categories follow birth and growth. Of course, the umbrella to hold them all is getting bigger and bigger. We are creating “special needs” as we go. **Really?**

There are so many, and two are getting considerable attention ... Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). **You think?** Almost everyone has ADD, and all youngsters who like to play outside are ADHD. Let’s put them all on “meds” ...how do you spell Ritalin?”. Maybe it’s just the Kool-Aid that causes all these special problems ... **You think?**

As I ponder these issues, you may note my tongue is clearly stuck in cheek ... or is it? These issues are challenging and certainly deserve our attention ... like the man who asked the Walmart clerk where the handicapped parking stickers are. He wanted to buy one. I’ve been somewhat disillusioned by all of the “handicap parking” stickers I currently see. It’s as though we’re heading for a day when all cars will be equipped with a handicap sticker, and we can all park as close as possible to the door ... so we can walk less and drive more ... creating the obesity condition, another “special need”. I’m not optimistic about this current trend.

But we need to exercise caution when labeling people as “special needs”. It can be “disabling” in more ways than one.

Here’s a special note about special needs: Jerry Traylor was born with severe Cerebral Palsy. He spent the first 10 years of his life in a bed and endured multiple surgeries. He wanted to walk. He graduated from his bed to a wheelchair, then a walker, then crutches ... which he proceeded to use as he ran across country from California to New York. When he arrived in New York he promptly ran the NY Marathon on his crutches. Twelve people have landed on the moon ... only one has run across country on crutches.

Jerry has been a motivational speaker for the past 17 years. There are thousands of stories like Jerry’s and just as many about people trying to purchase handicap stickers. Take your pick in life. There are two choices. Be a “creator” or a “victim”. The choice is always yours.

And may the wind be always at your back.

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