

What do you say when . . . ?

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

Children and adults with disabilities, along with their family members or friends, frequently encounter curious questions, stares and pointed fingers, and/or downright rude comments from strangers. My unofficial survey reveals that our *responses* to these situations vary according to what state we're in at the time (happy, rushed, exhausted, or other) and how much time we have at the moment!

While some of us have more experience responding to uninvited queries, few of us seldom walk away from such an experience with our emotions unscathed. Many parents learn early on to create a "stock answer" they can whip out without thinking. Still, we often wish we had been able to come up with a snappy retort. I've got some solutions!

First, however, know that you *do not owe anyone an explanation*. Strangers in the grocery store, acquaintances at church, and/or others do not have a "right to know"! The way a person with a disability looks, communicates, or anything else is no one's business. The following story (which I share during presentations about attitudes and perceptions) illustrates this point.

Amelia's 4-year-old son with autism goes ballistic in the grocery store check-out line. As Ryan pulls things off the candy racks, flaps his arms, and screeches, strangers stare, shake their heads in disapproval, and more. Amelia grabs Ryan by the hand, looks at the starers and says, "He has autism." This, she thinks, helps people understand why Ryan is behaving this way. Sounds okay, right? Wrong!

Look at the same situation involving a child who *doesn't* have autism. Picture Monica and 4-year-old Trey, who doesn't have a disability. When Trey goes ballistic in the grocery store, does Monica grab him by the hand and announce to the onlookers, "He takes after his dad!" (Monica might *want* to say that, but

she probably doesn't!) The point is, family members and friends of people who don't have disabilities do not apologize or explain! Why should we?

If you're still not convinced that you don't owe anyone an explanation, consider this. You're at the mall with your adolescent, pudgy daughter (who does not have a disability). What would you say if a stranger asked, "Why is your daughter fat?" You'd be incensed by this rudeness, wouldn't you? And you would not feel obligated to respond to this rude person. You would (I hope) defend your daughter, and protect her from this person's cruelty! The same should be true when we're asked questions about a

person with a disability. Just because a question is asked doesn't mean it needs to be answered!

Wanting to educate others about disability is honorable, but spending time explaining, in front of the person with the disability,

poses great risks. We should be more concerned about the feelings of the person with a disability than the curiosity of a stranger!

Now on to using humor! Following are several examples you can use as is, or modify them for your particular circumstances. In most cases, you'll need to discuss your new approach with the person who has the disability so he or she will be in on the scheme!

Responses to: "What happened to him?"

Become very serious and respond, "You know, we're not sure! A meteor landed in our neighborhood last night, and all the boys [or girls or 20-year-olds or whoever] in the neighborhood were affected. Do *you* know anything about it?"

Or, if parents are together when this question is asked about their child, they can simultaneously point to one another and exclaim, "He/She did it!" And then laugh uproariously.

Good humor is one of the best articles of dress one can wear in society.

William Makepeace Thackeray

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RESPONSE TO: "WAS SHE BORN LIKE THAT?"

With as straight a face as you can manage, and with pride oozing from your voice, say, "Why, yes! She has the Albert Einstein syndrome." (You could substitute a famous name: Marilyn Monroe, Zorro, Barbie, etc. or use a silly word—Eggplant Syndrome or Presidential Syndrome!) Alternatively (and this was shared by another parent), when someone asks, "Was she born like that," hold your hands about eighteen inches apart and respond, "No, she was about like this when she was born."

In most cases, QUESTIONERS will quickly turn away when any of these responses are used, recognizing that they shouldn't have asked the question. However, there's an additional strategy to use if they don't turn away, *or* you can use the following method to respond to just about any question. A QUESTIONER asks an insensitive question.

You respond by digging in your purse for pen and paper and say, "We're running late, and I don't have a lot of time right now, but I'll be happy to call you tonight. It'll only take an hour or so—what's your phone number and when is a good time to call?" The INQUIRING MIND will most likely back pedal away as quickly as possible! If, however, Ms. Nosy *does* give you her phone number, just toss it on your way out the door!

ANSWER A QUESTION WITH A QUESTION:

If using humor isn't your cup of tea, you can always rely on this method when someone asks a nosy question. With a friendly look on your face, respond with, "Why would you ask that," or "Why do you need to know that?" This will usually end the conversation and will help the person understand the question was inappropriate.

RESPONSES TO STARES:

If it's a stare "in passing," at the mall or somewhere else, smile the biggest, goofiest smile you can,

wave like you're Miss America, and say, "Hi! How are you?" as you keep moving.

If it's a "standing still stare," as when you're in parallel check-out lines, your technique will be a little different. Make eye contact with the STARER and then look to your right and left, as if trying to determine if you're actually the STAREE. Make eye contact again and point to yourself as in, "Me?" followed immediately with a big grin and an even bigger wave, as if you've been recognized for being a famous person!

STRATEGIES ABOUT COMMUNICATION:

If a stranger speaks to a child/adult with a disability and the child/adult doesn't respond because she doesn't have effective oral communication, there's no need to go into a long, drawn-out explanation about the disability. Just say something like, "She communicates with her eyes, and says 'Hi,' too." Or use an alternate explanation, that's respectful of the person with a disability, which will end the interchange.

Of course, people with disabilities can take on as great a role as possible in these humorous endeavors. For example, a child or adult can proudly announce, "I have the Eggplant Syndrome," followed by a giggle, and/or the person can take an active role doing the waving and grinning. And make sure to discuss using humor as a strategy with the person ahead of time and practice what will work best!

Ed Roberts (1939-1995), the Father of the Independent Living Movement, used a power chair and breathed through a portable ventilator tube. He made a *conscious* decision that when people stared at him, he would believe they were staring because *he was a star!* Ed's technique took the power away from the STARER and put it squarely in Ed's lap. These techniques can do the same for you; our attitudes are critically important!

Using humor can protect a person's privacy and feelings. No longer will you feel defensive or angry. You can laugh and enjoy the moment—let humor come to the rescue!

Good humor isn't a trait of character, it is an art which requires practice.

David Seabury