

Unlimited Adaptability: Teaching “People Safety” Skills to Individuals With Different Abilities

Irene van der Zande, Executive Director/Co-Founder

Kidpower is an educational charitable organization that, since 1989, has brought “People Safety” education to over 1.2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures - close to home and around the world. For publications; free articles, podcasts and e-newsletter; and information about our services and locations, please visit www.kidpower.org.

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The following article is an excerpt from “The Kidpower Book for Caring Adults: Self Protection, Confidence, Personal Safety, and Advocacy for Young People.” We have sold out of our advanced reader’s edition, and our official first edition will be released this fall. As with all our materials, the names and personal details about our students have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

Terry Brickley, Accessibility Pioneer

Terry Brickley was a psychotherapist who lived for many years with multiple sclerosis and acted as a huge force for creating accessibility in my community. As a pioneer in lobbying for rights for disabled people, he fought for rights many of us now take for granted.

Among his many accomplishments, Terry founded an organization called Adaptability Unlimited. A few months before he died, I called Terry to ask him if we could share his name to describe our special programs, because this concept fit our philosophy so well.

With typical creativity and humor, Terry flipped the name of his organization around and said, “No, but you can use Unlimited Adaptability instead.”

Focus on Possibilities Rather Than Limitations

Our philosophy in providing services is to look for what people *can do* rather than what they *cannot do*. We have learned that it is crucial to avoid making assumptions based on how our students look when we start. It is too easy to think that a young person who has a physical disability or a developmental delay is helpless.



Often children and youth with disabilities have triggers about learning new things. They might believe that they are helpless themselves and act in ways that make them seem much less capable than they actually are. Sometimes the people who know them the best will underestimate their ability to understand and to learn.

Our instructors begin working with what our students show that they are able to do and then build from there, adapting to make the skill work for the student rather than trying to force the student to fit the skill. We look for possibilities and growth rather than focusing on limitations.

Most Kidpower practices can be easily adapted. For example:

If our students can't see: We talk them through what they will be doing instead of showing them visually, or we get their permission to move their bodies to help them understand. We use language like, "show that you notice by turning your head" rather than telling them to "look." We focus on using their other senses to notice problems.

If our students have trouble talking: We work with whatever communication devices they have available. We practice using cards that explain what the problem is. We use the different ways of communicating which are available to them.

If our students are using a wheelchair: We say to "sit tall" instead of "stand tall" and practice skills sitting down. We show and practice Roll Away Power instead of Walk Away Power to leave potential safety problems. If we are teaching self-defense, we show Wheelchair Power, where they can use their wheelchair as a weapon to escape from an attack.

If our students have trouble hearing: We work with their sign language interpreters and focus on having them use their sight to notice trouble. We have them use sign language, written captions, drawings, or act out vividly without speaking.

If our students can't move one part of their bodies: We change our language to show how using other parts of their bodies or even just their imaginations can make the skills work. For example, we have a one-handed Trash Can for waving away hurting words if a two-handed Trash Can won't work. If Mouth Closed Power won't work because a student cannot close her or his mouth, then we might change this to "Safe Mouth Power.

If our students have difficulty understanding concepts: We keep our language very simple. We show them pictures or act out very concrete examples showing situations that are familiar to them.

If our students can't move or speak: We have the people who help them practice the skills for them, just as they help to meet their other needs.

Simplifying, Molding, and Substituting

When a student seems unable to use a skill, we teach slowly, in very small steps, giving this individual time and in the moment coaching, simplifying if necessary.

Suppose that Trisha cannot say, "Please don't do that." She might be able to learn this by repeating the words one at a time, even if she has to do this with long pauses in between at first.

If saying it like this is too many words, I can let Trisha practice just saying, "Stop." Or, "No." If that doesn't work, she might be able to make a noise and a hand motion that means stop.

A teaching technique we call “Molding” in Kidpower is often the best approach for people like myself who learn through movement. With their permission, our instructors “mold” students’ bodies to help figure out what motions are possible for them.

Suppose that Marco’s fingers are curled up and his arm is locked close to his body. This does not necessarily mean that Marco cannot move his arm.

I will ask Marco to reach with his arm towards my hand and to open his fingers. If need be, I will gently move his arm for him and push my palms onto his hands to help them open, patterning the motions until he is able to do them.

If that doesn’t work, I will substitute one motion for another. Marco’s slightly raised arm can still become a stopping gesture even with a curled up hand, especially if he can add the word, “Stop.”

It is important to keep the purpose of a skill in mind rather than getting stuck on the standard way that we might teach a technique. Someone who cannot make a Kidpower Trash Can by putting a hand on a hip can imagine throwing words away using a one-handed Trash Can by waving a hand along one side.

In one workshop, a boy named Fredrick could understand everything we said but was unable to move or speak by himself. His aide pushed his wheelchair for him as they pretended to move down the street. Pretending to be someone passing by, our instructor shouted at the two of them, “Look at that freak!”

Frederick’s aide grabbed the word “freak” and threw it into the trash, saying, “Fredrick is great!”

Frederick’s smile lit up the room!

Physical Cues

For students who cannot see or who have difficulty learning by watching, our instructors give lots of physical cues.

Suppose that Joy is walking with her head hanging down, her arms folded, and her shoulders hunched.

Since this passive, closed-down body language makes Joy look like a possible victim, my goal is to have her learn how to make her body look strong, aware, and confident.

I put my hand just above Joy’s head and say, “Push your head into my hand.”

As Joy lifts her head towards my hand, I keep raising my hand until she is standing at her tallest.

To help Joy relax her shoulders, I will say as I do it myself, “Lift your shoulders really high and then drop them like this.” If need be, I will have her push her shoulders into my hands and then drop them down towards her feet.

Finally, I stand behind Joy and say, “Turn your head to look at me.”

If Joy cannot turn her head without turning her whole body, I have her sit down in a chair and stand behind her so that she has to turn her head to face towards me. Once she knows how to do this well, then Joy can turn her head to glance back at me while standing and then again while walking away.

If Joy is blind or visually impaired, I explain that showing other people that you notice where they are is safer than seeming not to notice. Even if she can't see, Joy can still turn her head.

“I’m Pretending so We Can Practice”

People who are immediate in their emotions and think concretely need to be reminded that we are pretending during role-plays. Otherwise, they might get confused.

Once, in a third grade classroom, a little boy named Pablo who has Down’s Syndrome volunteered to help me with a role-play about setting boundaries on unwanted touch.

Pablo had been participating beautifully during the whole workshop, and he had no trouble with the first two steps of the role-play. He took my hand away from his shoulder and told me to stop.

I pretended to have hurt feelings and said, “I feel so sad! If you liked me, you’d let me touch your shoulder.”

Pablo’s face crumpled with compassion. He immediately ran up to me and threw his arms around me because he didn’t want to make me sad.

Eventually, I was able to persuade Pablo that I was fine and that I wanted him to set boundaries with me even though I was acting sad. I talked him into completing the role-play by explaining that he needed to know how to tell someone to stop even if that person was sad in case someone was doing something he *didn’t* like.

However, for the rest of the workshop, Pablo kept coming up to me and patting my back reassuringly just to be on the safe side.

Forever after that, Kidpower instructors start each practice with people where this might be necessary by saying, “I am pretending so we can practice.” We are especially careful to do this when we are acting upset for any reason or saying hurtful things.

Hug Management

Sometimes people put themselves into danger or cross the boundaries of others by being overly affectionate.

Suppose that Ginger seems compelled to give long intense hugs to everybody everywhere. Just telling Ginger not to hug people is not likely to be effective. She is most likely to remember not to hug everyone if she has practiced a different behavior she can use instead of hugging. The hug management plan we would make with her teachers and parents would include helping Ginger develop the skills of waving; walking quietly; asking first; giving short, gentle hugs; giving verbal greetings; and being okay with no hugs.

Out in public, Ginger can practice waving to others when her adults say it’s okay and walking quietly at their sides with her arms down when they say it’s not.

In settings with people she knows, Ginger can be coached to ask, “May I have a hug?”

The person practicing with her can say, “No thanks.”

Ginger can be coached to say, “Okay!”

Ginger's adult will then turn the practice around, so that Ginger gets asked for a hug and learns how to say, "No thanks!"

Sometimes the person practicing with Ginger will want to say, "Why yes, I'd love a hug."

Ginger can then be coached to say, "Thank you." She can practice giving a short, gentle hug.

Depending on her age and where she is, if Ginger feels that she must hug something, she can hug her jacket or a doll instead. In more private settings, she can be taught how to give herself a hug. She can be encouraged to find something else to do instead of hugging, such as helping to get things ready for a special activity.

The Power of Getting Help

Simple ideas can make a huge difference. In one workshop for profoundly deaf children, everything we said was interpreted into sign language by the teacher.

The teacher wrote to me that the day after our workshop, one of her six-year-old students signed that, "Kidpower says that problems should not be secrets." The child then showed her teacher the marks on her bottom made by her father's belt.

In this case, Child Protective Services did a very successful intervention with this family, providing parenting training and ensuring that one of the family members learned sign language in order to improve communications at home.

The teacher ended her letter by writing, "This little girl had been alone and scared. Now she knows the power of getting help. Thanks to you, she learned the language to communicate what the problem was, and thanks to all of us, this whole family has benefited."

Lessons From Sofia

Sofia has severe cerebral palsy and cannot move much or speak without help. She uses an electric wheelchair and a speaking tray with a computer that she can get to talk for her when she painstakingly punches in the letters. Sofia has a beautiful smile, a joyous spirit, and a very creative mind.

At age ten, Sofia came with her mother to a parent-child workshop. While other families were doing their practicing together, I worked with Sofia and her mother to figure out how to adapt our skills to her situation. We agreed on some new signs relating to safety that could be added to her speaking tray and on reprogramming her computer so that Sofia could yell for help with the push of one button, instead of several.

Sofia's bright eyes never left my face. She could put her hands up a little to make a boundary. She could make a loud noise to yell. She could even pull her arm away if I grabbed her, once I gave her a little time to pattern this movement. Together, she and I demonstrated the Stop Sign to the whole group. I pretended to be approaching her to bother her, and Sophia pushed her arm towards me in a "Stop" gesture and yelled. When we were discussing bullying, Sofia asked her mother through a combination of sign language and shared understanding to tell me about an incident at school when an older girl turned the power switch to 'off' on her wheelchair and left her in the empty hall between classes.

Sofia made *a lot of noise* with her voice, and eventually, a teacher came out and helped her. "Sofia has paranoid tendencies anyway," her mother said matter-of-factly, "and this really upset her."

Inside myself, I sighed and thought how sad it was that this devoted, committed mother was sticking the destructive label of “paranoid” onto her courageous daughter, possibly because some expert had told her that being fearful in difficult situations was paranoia.

I pulled up a chair so Sofia and I could be eye to eye, and I spoke to her directly, including her intently watching mother with an occasional glance and smile and waiting for Sofia to respond with her eyes and gestures to my comments.

“Sofia,” I said. “you don’t need me to tell you that life is sometimes unfair and that people are sometimes mean. ... I am so sorry that that happened to you, because it sounds awful. I would have been scared, too. ... But look how powerful you were! You were able to make enough noise that you got a teacher out of a noisy classroom to come and help you. ... I think you need to have a new sign added to your speaking tray that describes how to turn on your wheelchair so you have it if you ever need help like this again. ... Also, I do *not* think you are paranoid. I think you are *brave!*”

As Sofia smiled radiantly, I turned to her mother and said, “You have a very brave daughter. I’m sure you must be very proud of her.”

Her mother looked relieved and said, “I am!”

Focusing on what went right can reshape how someone feels about what went wrong.

Lessons From Sam

Sam uses an electric wheelchair at school because the lower half of his body is paralyzed. When I met him at age eleven, Sam had a mischievous grin, tussled sandy hair, earnest eyes, and a dynamite sense of humor.

Sam told me about a new boy in the grade above his who was stepping deliberately in his way in the halls between classes. This boy kept trying to hitch a ride on the back of his wheelchair.

Sam’s mother looked at me anxiously and said in a worried voice, “I don’t know if there is *anything* Sam can do. After all, he’s pretty helpless.”

“Hmm. Sam does not look helpless to me!” I said. “Let’s start with the hitching a ride problem first. Suppose I was that boy. ... Try saying loudly, ‘*Do not touch my chair!*’”

Sam repeated that and put his hands up to make a boundary.

“Leave one hand on the controls, Sam” I said. “Now suppose that boy climbs onto your chair anyway. Can you make it go backwards suddenly?”

Sam’s eyes widened and he started laughing.

“You could say, ‘Oops! I can’t always control this thing!’”

Sam started roaring in the wonderful way boys his age sometimes do, almost doubling over with laughter.

We agreed that he would practice with his mother to make sure that he would just jerk backwards a little – and not run the kid over. This was supposed to be a bully technique, after all, to stop someone from bothering you rather than an emergency self-defense move that might potentially injure an attacker. Sam played soccer in his wheelchair, and I was sure he would be fine with this move.

We discussed the possibility of a sign on the back of his chair saying "Danger! Do not touch!" Sam loved the idea of his wheelchair being dangerous!

Between delighted giggles, Sam shared his story and our solutions with the rest of the class when we got back together. Then we practiced being in the hall at his school. I stepped into his way and coached him to put one hand up, have the other on the controls, and say, "Get out of my way!"

The other kids in the group gave me ideas of what a bully might say, such as, "Too bad." "You can't stop me." "Make me."

I coached Sam to disengage and move in a veering arc around me as I was pretending to be the kid in his path bothering him. "But" I said, "If you are moving away and he steps into your path again and you happen to bump into him, is that his fault or yours?"

Sam thought a moment and said, "His!" He giggled again at the idea of being able to say "Oops!" if you happened to bump with your *dangerous* wheelchair into someone who is harassing you.

Reframing a negative label like "helpless" is a powerful tool that can change a child's world view.

Lessons From Elena

In many ways, large and small, we can create emotional safety simply by meeting our students where they are. At a workshop for developmentally delayed middle school students from Spanish-speaking homes, I went around the circle asking the students to say their names, their ages, and one thing they already knew about keeping themselves safe.

All of these children could speak in simple sentences and knew enough English to communicate. About halfway through the introductions, one girl I'll call Elena, put her head down when it was her turn and started to cry.

"Elena's very shy," said the teacher, echoed by several of the children. "She won't talk to you."

I moved to stand directly in front of Elena so she would not have to look at me across a large room full of people who were telling her she was too shy to talk. I lowered my head to the level of her downcast gaze until our eyes could meet. I smiled at her and asked, "Is your name Elena?" She nodded.

I stood up a little and her eyes followed mine. "Are you twelve years old?" I asked. Elena nodded again.

Standing all the way up now, still holding Elena's eyes with my own, I asked, "Is being quiet one way to stay safe sometimes?"

Smiling just a little now, Elena nodded again and she started to participate along with the others.

I made sure to put Elena in my small group for practicing when we got to the Trash Can Technique. "Do you know what, Elena?" I said in a casual way. "I am very shy, too. I know it does not look like it when I am teaching, but I often feel like hiding myself in a hole and disappearing. When I was your age, sometimes I did not talk in school at all. Do you believe me?"

Elena nodded her head a bit wonderingly.

Then I told her, "Get your Trash Can ready so we can practice throwing away the words, 'You are *too shy*, okay?"

Elena immediately got her Trash Can ready and looked right at me. "Elena," I said sternly, "you are *too shy*! She threw the words away.

"Now," I told her, "tell yourself these words, 'Being shy helps me to feel safe!' Will you please say that?"

She did and then I gave her a compliment to take in, "Elena, I think you are great, just the way you are!"

By the end of the workshop, Elena was running and yelling, just like the rest of the kids.

Lessons From Chad

Someone who is very slow to speak and seems slow to understand can sometimes comprehend issues at a very deep level.

At a workshop for developmentally delayed teens, a boy I'll call Chad raised his hand to volunteer to use the Trash Can Technique that I had just demonstrated. His teachers looked worried because they thought that he didn't understand the practice and were afraid that he would be confused.

Chad staggered up to me. He stood unsteadily next to me and the large trash bin that we had next to us on the floor.

"Is there anything mean that you say to yourself or that other people say to you that you want to practice throwing away?" I asked, putting my hand out to help Chad to get his balance.

As everyone waited, Chad held my hand and paused for what seemed like an agonizingly long time. Then he said very slowly, "I ... I ... I ... "

Even though his words weren't coming out right away, Chad's eyes were locked onto mine. I let go of his hand so he could stand on his own feet and waited silently.

"I," he continued, struggling for each word, "I ... wish ... I ... was ... different."

Along with every adult in the room, I blinked back tears. "Okay, Chad," I said firmly. "I want you to throw the words 'I wish I was different' away here in the trash."

I showed him and Chad did it himself, using both hands.

"Now," I said emphatically, "I want you to tell yourself 'I am *proud* of who I am!'" I patted my chest to show taking the words in.

Chad stopped wavering on his feet. He stood strong and tall, put his hand on his heart, and said slowly, "I ... am ... *proud* ... of ... who ... I ... am!"

As Chad strode back to his chair, everyone cheered wildly.