

Understanding Risk

Robert Perske said in 1972, *“there can be such a thing as human dignity in risk. And there can be a dehumanizing indignity in safety!”*

What is this discussion of risk all about, really?

Quality in Practice

First, it is often really a fear of liability. So let's get that out of the way right now. It is important to note that the United States is a litigious society. We like to sue each other and anyone can be sued or can sue for anything, at anytime. Once we understand that, we can more easily move past it. Organizations purchase liability insurance and individuals can purchase liability insurance through their renter's or homeowner's insurance policy. Get the insurance you think will meet your needs for whatever role you hold within the system.

Safety is a worthy goal, but we must be cautious that we are not dehumanizing in our quest. We need to consider the unintended consequences of our actions. Our quest for safety, often via overprotection, can be disrespectful to people, causing them to lose self-esteem and become frustrated and depressed. These feelings can lead people to rely on behavior to let us know how bad things have become. We respond by attempting to control the behavior, make judgments that people are not ready for any more autonomy (risk) and create an ever-downward spiral where the person experiences more harm from our behavioral interventions than they ever would have from taking the risk in the first place.

Now let's use some common sense. People with disabilities rarely ask or attempt to do things that are truly risky. Most often, people are trying to live their lives in a way that meets their needs. People may want to drive a car, spend some time alone, ride their bike around town, go swimming or spend time with

people who are not paid to be with them. These are all things the rest of us adults take for granted. We rarely, if ever, consider the risk too great.

So contemplate believing that the people we support are fully adults. What supports would we put in place for ourselves or any of our good friends who want to do things that they may never have done before?

- We'd talk about those things.
- We'd research the best safety practices and decide if that makes sense in our situation.
- We'd try something for a short period of time or with other people who have more experience.
- Then we'd evaluate that experience and make new decisions about moving forward.

Occasionally things will go wrong. If they do ...

- Take a look at what happened and think about what you have learned.
- Do not over-react.
- Do not write another policy that applies to everyone when something happens with one person.
- Be thoughtful. Ask people to think. Really think, not simply follow rules.
- Ask lots of questions and include everyone – the person you support, the direct support professionals involved, family, and community members involved in the activity.
- See where this leads you and your organization in supporting people to live lives of meaning and fulfillment.