



Needs-Rights-Responsibilities: A Balancing Act

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Families and formal systems have been working for many years to establish and fine tune a system of services and supports that honors the rights of each individual within his/her family and makes adaptations for individual needs. Within this effort, a primary training emphasis has been **rights** and **needs**. As time has passed, many have voiced frustration that this emphasis is somehow incomplete and lacks balance.

Within our system of family support, in order to find the balance that becomes sturdy and functions well, we need to consider not only rights and needs, but also **responsibilities**. We need to think about family support as a stool with three supporting legs—**rights, needs** and **responsibilities**.

Rights: We live in a land that is founded on a firm belief in the rights of its people. The Bill of Rights, written at the founding of our country over 200 years ago, entitled its citizens to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It affirmed and explained the rights of each and every individual.

Individuals with disabilities had their rights to a public education clearly described with the enactment of IDEA. This landmark legislation included specific terms and concepts, such as: free and appropriate public education, least restrictive environment and individualized plans and other services.

With the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the power of these laws and the Civil Rights Act, specifically for people with disabilities was further directed toward equal access in five specific categories: employment, state and local services, public accommodation and transportation, communications and miscellaneous areas such as insurance.

We know the purpose of the laws. In reality, though, regardless of how carefully they are worded, laws are subject to interpretation and misinterpretation. When we make a point of focusing on the spirit of the law, the letter of the law can be more easily discerned.

Needs: We are familiar with Maslow's hierarchy that identifies the levels of human need. At a most basic level, we have economic and physical needs (shelter, safety, food, clothing, and a stable income). These are the necessities for survival. In addition, we also have vocational/educational and medical needs, as well as recreational, emotional and social needs.

Within our system thinking, a need has been defined as "something that is lacking but necessary in order to achieve a desired outcome." In our time and culture, the line between needs and wants has become very fuzzy. Knowing the difference between needs and wants

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is important, particularly now as we are realizing that all needs are not necessarily satisfied by jumping to services as the solution.

We can all probably relate to the excitement that preparing for each grade brought when we were in elementary school. We brought home a list of materials needed for the year, and undoubtedly, crayons were listed. How delighted we were when we could convince our parents that we ‘needed’ (wanted) 48 or even 64 of those lovely new Crayolas — when in reality 16 would have done just fine!

Responsibilities: The responsibilities of families involve raising the next generation of learners, workers and citizens. That includes providing basic needs, such as food, clothing and shelter. The family assumes responsibility for the development and well-being of children through love, nurturance and limits, demonstration of work ethic, of moral values and spiritual growth. Another task within a family is to provide a family heritage or a sense of roots as a companion to encouragement that gives children confidence or wings.

The responsibility of service providers is to provide appropriate individualized services from a family centered perspective, recognizing and honoring that families are the constant in a child’s life. Within that framework, service providers have the responsibility of supporting the efforts of parents in raising their children by working in respectful partnerships together with families.

Actually, service providers and family members are all individuals. As individuals, we all have the obligation to own our responsibilities, being unwilling to play the victim in this culture that has made victimization attractive and lucrative. We all have the responsibility to stop passing the buck and blaming the other guy. We all have the right to be treated with respect. We all have the responsibility to give respect in return.

We have created an imbalance over time with the current notion that all needs must be fixed with services and money. This has professionalized the lives of families. There is currently much controversy and political debate about the role of services in the lives of families. It is clear that we never have enough teachers, nurses, social workers or other care providers to do what we have set out to do. The solution comes when each of us, as individuals, claims our rights, declares our needs and assumes our responsibilities. When that happens, our system will be in balance, serving as a sturdy support that functions for us all.

