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Dr. Carol Fiorile: Reaching Potential



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Potential. It is an interesting word. Simply put, it is the capacity to develop into something at a future time. It is used many times in the sporting world. A player is deemed to have a lot of “potential” if he or she shows promise at an early age. We also use it in everyday life. A deal could have potential, as well as various career paths hold potential. The tricky part of this word is when we attach expectations to it. What is the expected potential that someone or something has? Who or what determines that? Is anyone responsible for helping someone reach their potential?

When it comes to our children, then a whole new dimension is added. Factor in a special needs child, specifically a child with Autism, then everything takes on a whole new meaning. The

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potential and expectations fall far beyond the person with Autism, it lies with the medical community, the parents, and society, as well. The only way to really have any expectations is to have an understanding of the condition, and that is something that far too many people lack.

Dr Carol Fiorile, BCBA-D is a woman who is trying to change a lot of ideas about potential and expectations. She has spent the last 20 years trying to change perception and expectation, particularly in the arena of teaching. Knowing her background, it is no wonder that she is dedicated to doing this.

Carol was a responsible child beyond her years. When she was 8, she was given the task of caring for her newborn sister as her Mother was sick. She was able to take care of her family, do chores, and care for her Mom and sister, all while going to school. She even had a job, where she saved money, and was able to buy a car. She went to College at St. Johns University. She was an avid cheerleader and had aspirations to teach. St. Johns made sense, as it had a great basketball team (that she cheered for) and was an excellent school for her major. She graduated St. Johns with a BA in Elementary Education and a minor in Math. Carol then went to grad school at Adelphi University.

She secured a job teaching 3rd grade in Long Island. The teaching landscape was unstable at that time, and she was laid off 2 years in a row. She could only get substitute teaching work, which she really didn't like as it didn't allow her to actually teach and get to know the children. The biggest regret she had was that even though she was a great and compassionate teacher, tenure to teachers who were not involved would win out.

One example of this came on the heels of the Special Ed Law in 1975. Prior to that, special needs children had nowhere to go to get an education. If they were able to make it to a school, they were put in a regular class. There was an instance that a teacher berated a child with a severe learning disability and



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humiliated him in front of the class. “If THAT man can keep his job and I cannot, then teaching is not the profession I want to be in. Tenure has GOT to go!” That was the major impetus for her to switch professions. So, 6 credits short of her Masters, Carol left the teaching profession and moved back to Yonkers. Eventually, she took a job as a secretary at an advertising agency in Manhattan.

It wasn’t until many years later that the teaching bug ‘bit’ her again. For the next several years, Carol spent her time pursuing dance in Manhattan, got married, had a beautiful daughter, actually moved to Italy for a while, and wrote a book on Calligraphy in the Italian language. Several years later, Carol’s Dad was in bad shape, so she and her daughter moved back to Yonkers. She went back to school and finished her Master’s in Special Education and began to teach again. It was her real calling and the teaching climate had stabilized, so she felt she was able to make a career in the field she loved. After her Dad passed, she bought a house and her roots were firmly planted.

Carol began to teach at a school for disabled children in the South Bronx. Half the children had AIDS in this school, and several of them passed away during the year she taught in that particular school. She started working with an agency, and would work with special education students. Carol would get paid as a special ed. itinerate teacher. Around this time, Applied Behavior Analysis was becoming the treatment of choice for teaching Autistic children. Much of the methodology before that didn’t make sense to her. She met a teacher when she was working with a student, who introduced her to the ABA methodology. Carol was fascinated with this method and started to volunteer at the Fred Keller School in Yonkers.



From there, she applied to a program at Teachers College Columbia University to get a second Master's Degree in Applied Behavioral Analysis. While at Columbia, she continued on for her PhD in ABA, which she received in February 2005. Prior to that while at Columbia, one of her Professors, Doug Greer, founded a methodology that, in her mind, is the most effective implementation of ABA out there. The method was called CABAS or Comprehensive Application of Behavioral Analysis for Schooling. She was offered the opportunity to go to a CABAS school in England to help implement the program.

Back from England and armed with her PhD, Carol worked as a

director for an ABA program in Westchester. She had a company called STAR for Kids (Scientific Teaching and Resources for Kids). Carol mostly does consultation work to school districts in New York, New Jersey, and sometimes, Connecticut. For the last 8 years, she has taught at Queens College. She teaches graduate Special Education and some classes are actually ABA type classes. Her agency provides services to special needs kids, mostly geared to autistic children. Her current company is called Carol Fiorile Inc.

The most challenging part of what Carol does is to navigate each school systems rules and regulations. For example, the NYC Dept. of Ed has different rules than other school districts. Her job is to know what she can do, and to teach the teachers how to implement the methodology she believes works best. The problem is that the staff is not trained properly to teach. This, in her opinion, would significantly improve results.

She speaks of a student that she has worked with from the time he was 3. At that age, he had classic signs like hand flapping, obsessive compulsive behavior, and no language. Now 22, he is in college, he has a job, a girlfriend, and drives. She is hoping that he gets a job at Metro North soon. Another child she worked with for many years has worked hard, and now at 18, is reading at a second grade level, which is where he will probably stay. However, he works in a nursing home and has a productive life. She actually had one of her best experiences at the Judge Rotenberg Center in Canton, Massachusetts. The kids there are self-injurious, to the point of permanently hurting themselves or even killing themselves. They implemented a program there, and the people there have turned their lives around, can now work, and are no longer self-injurious.

This is where her passion is greatest. Teach the teachers how to effectively implement a system to work with Autistic people, and you can greatly influence what they can do. This goes back to the potential and expectation theme. If society doesn't turn

their back on Autistic children, then they can be taught to live productive and fulfilling lives. The key is to get those who do NOT have Autistic children to see that the potential is there, and that the expectation is not one of despair. Her definition of Autism is that an individual with the disorder has a breakdown in their ability to process multi-sensory stimulation simultaneously. They don't know what element of the environment is salient. It's like they are bombarded with stimulation and cannot filter it properly. It's neurological in nature, and the kids are born with the condition.

Another barrier is that the kids are getting tested psychologically and they typically score low. This is because the tests are standardized with "neuro-typical" children only. The Autistic child will score low, but it is not an indication of their true IQ, it is an indication of his or her needing help. In other words, the test score is skewed, so the child is given an unfair label. If the child scores a 50, the outside world will say, "Well, the kid has an IQ of 50. What can we do with him?" This is the way of thinking that really hurts the perception of a child and his or her potential. This is why it is so difficult to get funding for the programs. It is the false expectations of potential that hurt the children. Use the tests to JUST establish Special Education eligibility.

As for a cause, Carol is quick to say that the vaccination theory has been debunked. It was thought that children who received their vaccinations so close together would be a cause. Carol went on to suggest that In Vitro Fertilization may have a role in this. In one of her early classes, 8 of 12 Autistic children were In Vitro children. The hope is that now they have changed the process, by implanting the most viable embryo as opposed to implanting as many as possible. This will help. As to how many children have Autism, she finds it difficult to give a number. In her opinion, back then, children were under-diagnosed, and now they are over-diagnosed with the condition. The belief is that 1% of the world's population is afflicted.

Overall, Carol points out that it takes a lot of work to train staff, and a lot of oversight to make sure that the teachers can maintain their technique. It comes down to time and funding. Most districts do not want to, or can't afford to, invest the time and money to change the way Autistic children are taught. Doug Greer's program at Columbia is her preferred choice, but she acknowledges that there are many fine programs that exist. Dr. Greer's program stands apart in that it also teaches children academic instruction: Reading Writing, and Math.

Communication is a huge part of the program. Those who cannot communicate verbally need to find other ways to do so. Children who are unable to communicate verbally are at a severe disadvantage. The previous answer was to use a Dynavox machine at a cost of \$8,000. This is too expensive for many school districts. However, the advent of the iPad combined with special software (i.e., Proloquo2Go) has offered a wonderful alternative. There are programs that help a child to effectively communicate, and the cost of an iPad is significantly cheaper, so more school districts can afford one.

Another tough reality she faces is that she will be working with a student one on one in a Special Ed class, while there may be 5 or 6 that need her. Her kid will get out and move on, but the other kids will be stuck in an ineffective program. These kids will end up in a residential program that will actually cost more than if you can train people to teach the children correctly in the first place. This is where the issue of awareness comes into play: Getting a school system to see that logic has been difficult, and it is the biggest hurdles she faces on a day to day basis.

Her view on Autism Awareness month is that it is a great thing. She wants people to know that there are various levels of Autism, that Autistic children can be as smart as any other child their age, and that they just need to be taught differently. It is her mission to bring that teaching methodology to as many people as she can. As for potential and expectation? The potential of Carol's work is limitless, and our expectation is that

she will continue to do this for as long as she can.

By Mike Pirozzi

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