Natural Support: A Case Example

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Abstract

Recent efforts to achieve full community integration for individuals with developmental disabilities have focused on the use of informal support networks in the community rather than on traditional service agencies. This article uses a case study to compare and contrast this "natural support" model with a traditional service delivery model. The values underlying both models are presented.

Natural Support: A Case Example

Policy and best practice recommendations in the field of developmental disabilities advocate full community membership — persons with developmental disabilities are encouraged to be a part of daily activities with their peers who do not have disabilities, family members, co-workers and generic community service providers. Recently, efforts to achieve full community integration have focused on utilizing approaches that emphasize informal networks of support within the community, rather than traditional agency and professional service providers (e.g., Developing informal support systems, 1991; McFadden & Burke, 1991; Smull & Bellamy, 1989). This shift to a "natural support model" involves identifying family members, relatives, friends, neighbors, co-workers and other community members to assist individuals with developmental disabilities to become full members of the community. Such an approach provides a more flexible, less intrusive, long-term solution to meeting the needs of individuals with developmental disabilities. In addition, because there is less reliance on professional service providers, the natural support model may be more resilient in the event of funding cuts and staff shortages than a service-oriented model.

One area that exemplifies this shift from a service-oriented approach to a "natural support" model is in the area of supported employment. Typically, job coaches are hired to provide training and support to the employee with a disability. The job coach analyzes the tasks, teaches them to the employee and monitors employee performance across time. While the job coach model has been successful in assisting persons with disabilities to maintain employment in integrated job settings, there have been negative outcomes as well. For example, it has been observed that job coaches actually may interfere with an employee's full integration into the work setting by fostering an overly dependent relationship with the employee (Nisbett & Hagner, 1988).

The "natural support" model offers a solution to this problem by involving co-workers, supervisors, family and friends for initial and ongoing training and support. Employers may require technical assistance from a service agency, but the goal is to integrate the individual with a disability into the job setting with a minimum of artificial supports. Such support originating in the work place provides a level of independence and integration that is not possible with an "external" job coach, and has the additional benefit of providing a natural means of developing personal relationships.

With its emphasis on family and community support, the "natural support" model provides an opportunity for individuals and families to look beyond existing service programs and develop individualized programs to meet their specific needs. Rather than trying to fit an individual into established service programs, the "natural support" model allows individuals and their families first to identify their needs and long-term goals. A program plan based upon these goals is then developed that will meet their specific needs; such a plan may require resources not provided by existing service programs. The emphasis that is placed on personal choice encourages individuals and their families to become equal partners with human service professionals and agencies in developing solutions to issues affecting their lives.

The shift to a "natural support" model will require a change in how we think about providing for the needs of persons with developmental disabilities and their families. We must examine our values and beliefs about who is capable of living in the community and how we can best achieve full community integration for these individuals. This article is intended to facilitate this process by contrasting the current service-oriented model with a "natural support" model through a case example. The case study centers on Mark (not his real name), a 24-year old adult with Down syndrome who lives in a group home with seven other adults with developmental disabilities and two full-time adult staff members.

Issues in Mark's life are presented in Table 1 with examples of how a service-oriented versus a "natural support" model might address each issue. The values associated with the two approaches are listed below each issue.

Table 1. Contrasting values and approaches in the service versus support model

Issue: Mark initially requires on-going supervision to complete his job tasks in a timely manner.

Service Paradigm	Support Paradigm
Values: Independence Task-Focused Outcomes	Values: Interdependence People Focused Outcomes
A job coach is hired to provide on-the-job training for Mark. The job coach analyzes the job tasks, observes Mark's performance, and identifies methods to increase the rate and accuracy of Mark's job performance. Mark is verbally reinforced by his job coach for increasing his rate and skill levels. He remains on-the-job with Mark until the stated objectives are met. Once the job coach leaves, Mark has difficulty maintaining his performance at the required level.	Mark job coach works to enlist the support of persons in Mark's work site to help Mark succeed in his job assignments. There is less emphasis on increasing Mark's work rate and more emphasis on building work relationships. A fellow employee is identified to help Mark stay focused on job tasks. In addition to being an ongoing source of on-the-job support for Mark, the employee helps co-workers who have little or no experience with persons with developmental disabilities to understand and interact with Mark.

Issue: Mark has participated for some time in training programs to use public transportation independently but he often becomes distracted by people and activity around him, and forgets to get off at his bus stop.

Service Paradigm	Support Paradigm
Values: Individual Participation Artificial Supports	Values: Network Linkages Natural Supports
A training program is developed to teach Mark how to use the bus independently and function as an individual bus rider. Mark's job coach rides the bus with him, tapping Mark's arm when it is time to pull the "stop" signal. As long as he is reminded by his job coach, Mark remembers to pull the signal and exits the bus at the correct stop.	Mark's job coach acknowledges the need for Mark to have reminders to exit the bus at the correct points and to expand the network of support to include the bus driver. The job coach works with Mark to inform the bus driver of his stop as he gets on the bus. The bus driver agrees to help Mark, and, in addition, identifies several regular riders who agree to remind Mark when the bus is nearing his stop. In the event that there is a change in bus driver or riders, Mark carries a card with his bus schedule and emergency phone numbers. Mark's job coach rides the bus several more times to support the bus driver and other regular riders in their roles to remind Mark when to exit the bus.

Issue: Mark's case-manager has identified recreational activities, particularly on weekends, to be a particular need of Mark's. While Mark's weekdays are busy with work activities, weekends are generally boring for Mark who has developed limited friendships in the neighborhood.

Service Paradigm	Support Paradigm
Values: Service-Based Approach Provide Solutions to Problems	Values: Family-Centered Approach Support Individuals to Solve Problems
Mark's case-manager locates the nearest facility with a weekend recreational program. Unfortunately, it is not within walking distance of Mark's group home, so the case-manager arranges for Mark's parents to provide transportation to and from the recreational program.	Mark's family plays a key role in planning for his needs. Together with his case manager, they gather a group of consumers and families in the community to meet with the director of recreational services to establish weekend programs in the community. The families establish a carpool for their children, as well as for other individuals in the community who need transportation to the recreational facility.

Issue: Mark has clear preferences about working, but he often does not have choices in the types of work activities available to him.

Service Paradigm	Support Paradigm
Values: Right to Participate Prescribe Programs	Values: Right to Choose Choices in Programs
Mark's vocational trainers and case manager advocate for Mark's right to participate in vocational activities in the community. They select appropriate job sites for Mark and introduce him to the people in each program.	Mark's case manager works to increase Mark's range of choices in daily activities. The vocational trainer and case manager work with Mark to identify his work preferences. A number of possible jobs are discussed with Mark. He is assisted in selecting 2-3 possible sites and then interviews for each position.

Issue: Mark has had a number of job placements that have not worked out, largly due to communication difficulties.

Service Paradigm	Support Paradigm
Values: Program Determination Institutionalized Programs	Values: Self-Determination Individualized/Personalized Programs
Mark's program is determined by professionals who recommend a complete speech and language evaluation. After a referral to the speech and hearing clinic, the professional team determines that Mark needs speech therapy to improve his articulation for specific words and to complete brief conversations with co-workers. He is enrolled in twice weekly speech therapy for this purpose.	Mark is presented with the issue that his communication with other people is unclear. His support team, consisting of his job coach, case manager, co-worker, supervisor, and natural support leader (identified by Mark) talk with Mark about his speech and ask him if he would like help to speak more clearly. If he agrees, the team will assist Mark in stating the types of communication most important to him, such as asking directions when he is lost, talking to people at work, and asking for help on-the-job. A speech and language support plan would then be developed to assist Mark communicate more clearly in the areas that he selects.

Issue: Mark worked in a community job setting, but was released because his social behaviors were unacceptable to his employers.

Service Paradigm	Support Paradigm
Value: Specialized Segregated Programs	Value: Integrated Programs
Mark is trained in a segregated setting to assure that his behavior is manageable before he is placed in a community job. Mark's case-manager works with the behavior specialist to develop a program to increase appropriate behaviors that will help Mark be more successful in his next community job placement.	Mark is trained in his actual job setting. Mark's case manager works with Mark and his employer to identify conditions that contribute to Mark's behavior problems. Mark's support team (employer, co-workers) work together to adapt his schedule and activities to prevent inappropriate or unacceptable behaviors, and to reinforce positive behaviors.

Issue: Mark's regular contact with people is limited to his care home provider, housemates, job coach, bus driver, work supervisor, and coworkers.

Service Paradigm	Support Paradigm
Value: Use Technical Experts	Value: Build Relationships
Specialists are hired to assist Mark in learning the skills he needs to work, use transportation, manage his money, maintain self care, conduct daily living chores, and interact appropriately with other people. His job coach is responsible for training Mark in all of these areas, as they relate to getting to work on time and completing his work. Other professionals are consulted and occasionally interact with Mark to assess and develop his social, language, and recreation skills.	Mark's case manager works to expand the number and quality of Mark's contacts with people in his home, work, and community who will assist Mark to complete necessary daily living tasks and, perhaps, become his friends. The natural leaders in each of Mark's environments are supported by his job coach and work supervisor who, in turn, inform others of Mark's presence and potential need for assistance to complete necessary tasks. These environments include, but are not limited to, the job-site, public swimming pool, Mark's favorite fast-food restaurants, and local grocery store.

Conclusion

The issues faced by Mark and his family are typical of those confronted by adults with disabilities. The "natural support" model presents an alternative approach to addressing their needs by allowing and encouraging them to look for assistance beyond existing service programs to informal community supports. By focusing on building community relationships and supports, the "natural support" model recognizes that informal support relationships can accomplish the same goals as more formal service-oriented approaches. Rather than accepting that existing services are the best and only solution to meeting one's needs, the family-centered approach advocated by the "natural support" model grants the family the freedom of choice to develop alternative solutions to meet their specific needs. Individuals and families assume an active role in life decisions and build upon existing resources in their own neighborhoods and communities. Additionally, the "natural support" model increases opportunities for interaction between community members and persons with disabilities. For persons without disabilities, exposure to persons with disabilities serves to build positive attitudes and to reduce barriers to full integration.

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