

# Learning in a Grown Up World

by David Morstad

The buzz words have been around for decades: “age appropriate activities.” Simply put, we all choose activities and learning environments based on our age. If our adult Bible study time included activities suitable for third-grade students, few of us would tolerate it for very long before we started looking for the door.

Sadly though, adults with developmental disabilities are often not so fortunate. Teaching activities in some environments include music and craft projects that would be very much at home among young children. Caring, well-meaning teachers make the best decisions they can, of course, and let’s face it, our historical misunderstanding of disabilities has done little to help the situation.

While its popularity is waning rapidly, it is still not unusual to hear people refer to the “mental age” of someone with a disability, e.g., “He’s forty years old but he functions at the level of a five-year-old.” The concept of mental age is meaningless and has never been a legitimate means of measuring anything about a person. All it does is perpetuate the myth that the adult with an intellectual disability is still, to some extent, not fully adult.

As teachers, it is important to be mindful of this concept simply because it can help guide effective teaching activities.

## **Adults with disabilities are adults**

When we see people struggling against learning barriers, we may be tempted to conclude that they are simply “stuck” at a

child’s level of development. They’re not. They are adults who are facing particular learning barriers in their lives.

Most learning is sequential with one thing leading naturally to the next. When adults with developmental disabilities get caught in the activities of endless elementary school it

puts boundaries on their world and limits their experiences. When that happens, learning slows down.

People with disabilities not only deserve full access to their community and their world but learning improves when that exposure happens.

## **A question of dignity**

Engaging adults in children’s activities carries with it a loss of personal dignity. Our actions send the message that people with disabilities are different from the rest of us and that we simply do not expect them to learn much. In turn, that affects the way in which we, and others around us, interact with them.

The world is full of highly capable, non-disabled people who aren’t particularly good at doing their taxes or balancing their check books. How often are they described as having “the arithmetic age of a 12-year-old?” We wouldn’t dream of it! Rather, we view them as complete people, worthy of our respect, who have skills in some areas of their lives and seek the assistance of others where they need to. Adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities deserve the same consideration.

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