

## Comments to NOS Magazine regarding Mental Age Theory Sept 2017

**Cheryl Felak**

SEPTEMBER 10, 2017 AT 7:28 PM

In all areas of life – school, career, athletics and sports, hobbies- there are ranks, steps or skill levels which one passes through to get to the next level. This is natural progression. In most areas unless one has mastered or at least made a passing effort, one is not able to proceed or progress. There could be many reasons for this.

People do not excel in all areas of life and do not need to be an expert in everything they attempt to have enjoyment and meaning from it. Also, people may “stall out” at one step and many years later may revisit and then gain more skills. This is not set in stone and there is always learning and progress occurring as people experience life. This progression is also true with developmental, emotional and maturity stages. It is not “good” or “bad” but just is.

I recently listened to a podcast from NPR “The TED Radio Hour” entitled “Beyond Tolerance” and realized that many of the issues we face in disability advocacy are exactly the same as those in race and politics. We get stuck with inflexible ideology and that becomes a very dangerous thing. The term “motive attribution asymmetry” used in political and race conflicts, can also be applied to disability advocacy.

Motive asymmetry means that one group believes it’s motives are driven by love, care and affiliation but their opponents are motivated by emotions opposite to their own. As a parent/guardian/disability advocate, this concept is very clear to me since I have been told by many trained self-advocates that guardians are only self-serving. This is truly not my perspective at all but it is attributed to me since I am a guardian. One effective tool used to help bridge this conflict is to meet in person. Once you know the person, views and ideas may change. It is only by meeting people and working together as people, rather than inflexible ideologies, that we can break down these silos and make progress.

I often hear that people do not like labels – but labels help us to learn and navigate life in so many ways. Think for instance of working in trades – there are labels applied to levels of skill development – apprentice, journeyman, master. One is not a better person than another by having a different label but has a different skill set. These labels help us, who may not be familiar with the work to be done, who we might want to seek out for consultation. Labels are not inherently bad but can be extremely useful in many situations.

I am asking for your input into how you, as a trained self-advocate, differentiate between people who may need an extreme amount of support to manage the daily activities of living versus someone who may only need some occasional guidance with specific areas? How do you, as a trained self-advocate, differentiate between someone who is unable to utilize public transportation and needs to be driven everywhere in a private vehicle versus someone who can navigate the city independently on public buses?

Or maybe you do not see the need to differentiate – if not, why not?

I see the need to have some sort of label because it helps to clarify how much support that person may need in order to be successful with integration, employment and inclusion. For instance, if my son wanted to go to a concert (which he loves to do) and someone who was not aware of his labels, wanted to help and volunteered to take him, it could be deadly. They may just drive him to the venue and let him out of the car. My son, while 23 years old, has the emotional maturity of a toddler. He also has the public safety and traffic safety knowledge of a toddler. These are levels of support that my son needs that are not apparent by looking at him. I am by no way saying this to discriminate against him but to show that he is an individual and needs specific supports. How does one communicate this need without applying some sort of label?

REPLY

**Sara Luterman**

SEPTEMBER 10, 2017 AT 8:37 PM

This seems fairly straightforward: Some people have high support needs. Some people have higher support needs than others. Some people's support needs involve help taking transportation, or tying shoes, or getting a diaper changed. Support needs do not transform adults into children.

Your son does not have the (insert thing here) of a toddler. He's an adult man who needs extra help being safe around traffic.

It's about respect. You can respect someone and acknowledge they need assistance to do their best at the same time.

REPLY

**Cheryl Felak**

SEPTEMBER 10, 2017 AT 8:47 PM

Absolutely correct – support needs do not transform adults into children. Neither does saying “having the emotional maturity of a toddler” transform my son into child – it is a way of easily categorizing the behavior that my adult son exhibits and one that is easily recognizable by those who may be unfamiliar with adults who may need a high level of support to stay safe in public places.

It also has to do with knowing people – you don't know me or my son and so may be reading this from a totally different perspective from people who have met us or have worked with us over the years.

I did notice that you mentioned “getting a diaper changed” I have been instructed by disability advocates not to use the term “diaper” since it is related to babies – we were to use the term “wraps” – just curious on your perspective of this?

REPLY

**Ivanova Smith**

SEPTEMBER 10, 2017 AT 8:52 PM

You son has a Intellectual disability. I did not take away that “label”. I saying he not a child he has 24 years of experience in age that make him not under 24 mentally. Mental age has nothing to do with support Needs. Stephan hawking needs personal support needs. Yet can know how not call him mentally a child. Why is it considered ok to do this to

intellectually disabled when we need supports but then think it not ok with those with physical disabilities to call them children for having support needs? Isn't ok either way! Just because a person needs assist figuring out traffic don't not mean they are a child. That not taking away identity or what you call "label" and being more accurate and respecting the person humanity and age! Not taking away there rights. Allowing autonomy that adults gain.

Ivanova Smith

REPLY

**Ivanova Smith**

SEPTEMBER 11, 2017 AT 9:16 AM

"Having emotional maturity of a toddler" .....that still mental age theory. As person who still has public meltdowns as adult I be very offended if someone discribed me that way. That really demeaning and that still supports mental age theory.....it not good way to discribe person support needs or emotional regulation struggles.

I think wipes better term then diaper. There other activists that have written about diaper issue to.

REPLY

**Cal Montgomery**

SEPTEMBER 11, 2017 AT 9:16 AM

A 24-year-old person has the body of a 24-year-old, the mind of a 24-year-old, the emotions of a 24-year-old, and the [whatever] of a 24-year-old. \*By definition.\*

You know who has the [whatever] of a 2-year-old? A 2-year-old. \*By definition.\*

When I was 24, I was different than you were at 24, and we were each different from Laura Ivanova Smith. All three of us were different from your son at 24. People differ.

And we can say all of that without being rude to anyone.

REPLY

**stephanie**

SEPTEMBER 11, 2017 AT 3:26 PM

This article is fantastic. Thanks for your insights- i've shared it!

REPLY

**Cheryl Felak**

SEPTEMBER 11, 2017 AT 4:43 PM

Your comment is awaiting moderation.

In trying to describe situations and characteristics we often use similes and metaphors to help those who are not familiar with jargon understand the situation. When using these figures of speech, we are in no way belittling the person or saying that person is any less or more than anyone else. These figures of speech are extremely common and are used throughout all types of writing and speech.

Maybe this is part of the problem with trying to describe a person. When saying that a "person acts like a toddler" we are using a simile – it is not saying that person is a toddler at all. It is describing that particular behavior at that particular moment or situation. In the case of my son, his behavior or understanding may not be typical for a 24-year-old in that particular situation.

One could also say that “he is a toddler” which is a metaphor. The simple definition of a metaphor is that a metaphor states that one thing IS another thing but the statement is not literal – it is just figurative. Many may misinterpret this as the speaker actually saying this is true when in the fact the speaker was using a metaphor.

In the issues of trying to describe the support needs (be it physical, intellectual, behavioral or other) we often need to use similes to help others who are unfamiliar with that person or situation be able to grasp the magnitude of the need. Again, in no way does this figure of speech demean the person being spoken about but can help those understand the level of supports that may be needed to help that person be successful. One other example of this is referring to a person with progeria as having the body like an old person. The person with progeria is a child but their bodies age prematurely and they have many health issues that are typically seen in the geriatric population.

Using similes and metaphors as figures of speech is a common and needed practice to help people understand others. We all have reference ideas in our heads about various things. I’m sorry that people may not understand this issue but that is how the English language works – it’s not the only confusing thing about this language.

(this may be a duplicate post – I tried to post from my iPad but don’t see it here so am reposting from my desktop.)

[REPLY](#)

**Cheryl Felak**

SEPTEMBER 11, 2017 AT 4:46 PM

Your comment is awaiting moderation.

It appears as if my other comments have been deleted. Is there a reason for that?

Thank you

[REPLY](#)

**LEAVE A REPLY**