

**15** **DEVELOPMENTAL AGE** **7**  
**12** VS. **24**  
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Revolutionary Common Sense  
by Kathie Snow

The “developmental (or functional) age” concept is a disability-world paradigm that should make us halt in our tracks. Many children and adults with disabilities are routinely graded against a “developmental scale.” If a person’s abilities are substantially lower than the “norm,” he may be saddled with a “developmental age” (DA). His chronological age (CA)—his real age—is dismissed as irrelevant. From that point on, services, education, and even the way he’s treated by family members may be based on his DA. Yikes!

What happens when, for example, a 15-year-old (CA) is *treated* like a 10-year-old (DA)? He’ll probably *act* like a 10-year-old! Do we wonder why so many people with disabilities are considered “behind” or “not ready?” *Dub!*

During my son’s kindergarten IEP (Individualized Educational Program) meeting, the physical therapist shared her report with the IEP team. When she read, “Benjamin functions at the level of an 8-month-old,” I thought the kindergarten teacher was going to faint. I, on the other hand, was horrified that my son was portrayed this way. Luckily for us, 5-year-old Benjamin was present, and his presence refuted this testimony! He was sitting in a little chair at a little table, “reading” a book out loud (one of many he had *memorized*). When the kindergarten

teacher heard the “8-month-old” level, she looked from the therapist to Benjamin and back again several times.

After being questioned about her statement, the therapist revealed this assessment described his “gross motor” skills. Since Benjamin had never crawled, his “development” (gross motor) was—and would be forever, I suppose—“fixed” at the level of an infant. If Benjamin had not been in attendance at that IEP meeting so that the teacher could see who he *really* is, his opportunities for inclusion would have been diminished. The teacher would have probably insisted that he not be in her classroom that year. But his physical presence at the IEP meeting demonstrated that he was definitely not like an 8-month-old!

While doing presentations around the country, I routinely meet parents who describe their children by their disabilities, and include a statement like, “Brian is eight, but he functions at the level of a 4-year-old.” Egads! Who made this ridiculous presumption? And why would anyone believe it?

Brian might have “tested” at the level of a 4-year-old on one type of assessment or another, but he has double the life experience of a 4-year-old, so how in the world can we say he “functions” like a 4-year-old?

## 2 - Developmental Age vs. Chronological Age

Let's use our common sense here! Children who *do not* have disabilities are all over the map in their development! A 10-year-old (without a label) may read like a 13-year-old, play soccer like a 16-year-old, and behave like an 8-year-old—and he's considered "normal!" Then there are adults *without* disabilities, like myself: at the age of 52, I routinely vacillate between acting like a 10-, a 20-, and an 80-year-old. But no one ever puts a developmental or functional age on me! Why, then, do we do this to people with disabilities?

We have mistakenly assumed that treating a person as if he were his developmental age is a good thing. We may even believe, for example, that (1) a child could not be successful if he was educated in a classroom with others of the same chronological age or that (2) an adult could not do a certain type of job because of his developmental age. If you're concerned about a person with a disability "not being at age level," look carefully at his environment and how he's treated by others. Perhaps he's not "acting his age" because he's not being treated as the age he really is! *Duh!*

Routinely, young children (with and without disabilities) are held back in kindergarten and the primary grades because it's believed they're "not ready" for one reason or another. But many people are recognizing the dangers of this practice. Adults, with and without disabilities, who were held back in school painfully reveal the years of stigma attached to being older than their peers

in school. It can become a lifelong legacy of perceived failure that crushes a person's soul.

So what can we do when someone isn't "at the same functional level" as her chronological age? In some cases, the answer is nothing! In other cases, we can provide accommodations, supports, and/or assistive technology devices!

When deciding whether to do nothing or something, we once again need to use our common sense. If a child, for example, is not quite as mature as his peers, so what? Give him time to mature. If he's six, he needs to be surrounded by other 6-year-olds so he'll learn how to be a

six. Keeping him with 4-year-olds will only encourage him to remain like a four.

If, however, a 6-year-old is thought to be like a 2-year-old because he's not talking, he needs a

communication device! If a student isn't reading "at grade level," she needs modified reading materials and/or opportunities to learn through methods other than reading.

If a teenager or young adult doesn't "behave" at an "age-appropriate" level, he needs to be with others of a similar age, in positive, supportive environments where he can learn "how to be" that age. People around him need to have high expectations for him, as well as patience. And he may also need behavior supports.

Let's dump the developmental (functional) age concept once and for all! Let's treat people with disabilities with the respect and dignity they've earned for the number of years they've lived on this Earth!

Treat people as if they were  
what they ought to be and you  
help them to become what they  
are capable of being.

Johann von Goethe