Age appropriateness

Ian Bell
Specialist Independent Speech and Language Therapist

This document is available to download from my website at http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/communication-in-vi-children/

A range of other articles is also available on the website. They focus particularly on addressing the communication needs of people who have visual impairment and additional disabilities, but they are also likely to be of interest to those concerned with children and adults who have learning disabilities.

Please refer to this document by acknowledging the author, providing the web address and noting the date that you accessed the article.

Ian Bell
January 2014
I have long been concerned about what is typically referred to as “age appropriateness”. There are many practitioners in the field of learning difficulties / disabilities who insist that all activities, materials and items presented to the people they educate or care for should be “age appropriate”. They believe, for example,

- that a 13-year old girl with profound learning and physical difficulties should listen to the latest pop music, or to “good” music such as pieces by Mozart, despite much preferring the nursery rhymes she has known for years and which she finds comforting and relaxing
- that a man in his 20s who has poor control over his oral muscles and who cannot safely take liquids from an open cup, should nevertheless drink from the same type of cup as everyone else when they go into the local café
- that an 18-year old young man they describe as “obsessed with cartoons” should not recite snippets from them when shopping in the local supermarket.

What “age appropriateness” means, in fact, is that activities, materials and items are chosen without regard to the needs, interests or preferences of the people they are supposed to be for. These imposed activities, materials and items are deemed to be appropriate for the person’s chronological age. Why? What is so important about that?

The activities, materials and items that we should present are those that are appropriate first and foremost for the person’s health (physical and emotional) and safety. They should be appropriate for the person’s

- emotional understanding
- physical skills
- sensory skills
- communicative skills
- cognitive skills
- developmental and / or functional needs.

Despite the claims of those who advocate (chronological) age appropriateness, there is almost next to nothing in the literature about this issue. We are constantly being urged to adopt evidence-based practice. Where is the evidence that it is appropriate to impose on people activities, materials and items that are chronological-age appropriate?
Age appropriateness

Someone who has addressed age appropriateness is Dave Hewett. His discussion of this during the Intensive Interaction course I attended several years ago was most interesting and his views matched mine very closely. His course notes included two excellent pages on this issue. If you have attended an Intensive Interaction course, I suggest you check your course notes and read this material on age appropriateness if it is included.

When I made an internet search for “age appropriateness learning disability” (but without the quotation marks) on 21st January 2014, the only helpful item I located was a piece by Hewett in the Intensive Interaction blog. I recommend it: [http://www.intensiveinteraction.co.uk/blog/user-contributions/issues-arounriateness-aa/00052.html](http://www.intensiveinteraction.co.uk/blog/user-contributions/issues-arounriateness-aa/00052.html).

Several years ago, not long after I had joined an organisation, I received induction training in a variety of topics. An element of the training which really caught my attention, and which has remained with me ever since was the following. An internet search on 21st January 2014 located it at [http://www.oafccd.com/lanark/poems/language.html](http://www.oafccd.com/lanark/poems/language.html).

**Language of Us / Them**

**by Mayer Shevin**

*We like things*
  - They fixate on objects

*We try to make friends*
  - They display attention seeking behavior

*We take breaks*
  - They display off task behavior

*We stand up for ourselves*
  - They are non-compliant

*We have hobbies*
  - They self-stim

*We choose our friends wisely*
  - They display poor peer socialization

*We persevere*
  - They persevereate
Age appropriateness

We like people
  They have dependencies on people

We go for a walk
  They run away

We insist
  They tantrum

We change our minds
  They are disoriented and have short attention spans

We have talents
  They have splinter skills

We are human
  They are . . . ?

In the light of this piece, I offer the following.

Why is it that many of us sneer at those people whom we too-readily describe as being “obsessed with Thomas the Tank Engine”? Are these people so different from me? I am what has been variously called a rail enthusiast / gricer / anorak. In other words I have an extensive library of books and articles on railways; I enjoy taking photographs of trains, stations and so on; I frequently buy magazines about railways; I have taken over what should be a bedroom in our house and installed a model railway in it, and I very much enjoy operating it. Or perhaps I’m obsessed with railways, and play with my trains; perhaps I do things which aren’t age appropriate.

Why is it that many of us sneer at an adult with learning disability who clings to a teddy bear? Is this person so different from my wife and me? Strewn around our house is quite a large collection of teddies and dolls. We don’t do anything with them, but neither do we throw them out. Some of them go back a very long way, including Little Ted, who, like his “owner”, must be all of 62 years old. Does our collection mean we are babyish? Do we have items which aren’t age appropriate?

No-one should have chronological-age appropriate activities, materials and items imposed on them. Rather, they should be presented with activities, materials and items which they enjoy, which meet their needs and which provide the support they require.
Age appropriateness

In some ways age appropriateness is closely linked with challenging behaviour. It is important to note that many of the behaviours regarded as challenging in some contexts are behaviours we all display.

For example, we all urinate. Almost all of us do so in private, and usually in a toilet; in the community, females use the “ladies”, males use the “gents”. Babies and infants, who have not learnt to control their bladders, are provided with nappies. In time, they acquire bladder control and then learn the conventions around urinating; at all stages, their behaviour is considered to be acceptable – or age appropriate.

Let us consider a boy who has learning difficulties, who has more or less acquired bladder control, but has not learnt the conventions concerning appropriate places to urinate: he sometimes urinates in public. His urinating behaviour might be considered by many people to be unacceptable – not age appropriate. Yet, in the context of his cognitive, emotional, sensory and physical skills, urinating in public may be appropriate – after all, some toddlers are allowed to urinate against a wall in the street if “taken short”. What should we do in respect of this boy with learning difficulties? We could refuse to take him out into the community. We could take him out, but monitor his behaviour; as soon as there was the least sign of him needing to urinate, we could take him to a toilet. We could take him out, and have no concerns about him urinating in public.

We could also try to educate the public about the needs of people who have learning disabilities. But, in fact, how realistic is this? In effect, if educating Jo Public is to have a positive impact, it means persuading people to be more tolerant and understanding.

But how successful are those of us who work with disabled people at being tolerant and understanding?

How often, when queuing at a supermarket checkout, do we become really impatient because an elderly person in front of us is being really slow? Yet we know older people move less easily, think more slowly, fumble their money and lack confidence in busy places.

How often, when we are hurrying to walk to the station on our way home from work, do we get annoyed when we are delayed a few seconds by someone in a wheelchair? And yet we know this person has as much right to be there as we do.
How often, when we greet a stranger we pass on a country walk do we become irritated because we receive no response? And yet we know some people are very shy, and others have social communication difficulties.

We like to think we are tolerant and understanding, but all too often we are not. We do not always behave in “age appropriate” ways when it comes to being tolerant and understanding.

This issue of age appropriateness provides a great deal of food for thought. There are many tricky situations for which there are no easy answers, especially with regard to the links with challenging behaviour.

Nevertheless, I have no hesitation in repeating my firmly held beliefs that

- no-one should have chronological-age appropriate activities, materials and items imposed on them
- disabled people should be presented with activities, materials and items which they enjoy, which meet their needs and which provide the support they require.