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GENTLE TEACHING

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Gentle Teaching is a positive approach to behavior management which focuses on the teaching of ‘bonding’ between persons with mental retardation and their care givers. Bonding refers to the development of a mutual tie of affection, a positive relationship between two people. In the Gentle Teaching Approach, this bonding is considered more important than the development of independent skills.

Many people use the term ‘Gentle Teaching’ to refer to the whole range of positive approaches (the same as we equate Kleenex and tissues). I prefer to limit the term ‘Gentle Teaching’ to the approach specifically espoused by its founder, John McGee, Ph.D.

John McGee has now written two books on the Gentle Teaching Approach:

[Gentle Teaching: A Non-Aversive Approach to Helping Persons with Mental Retardation](#)

[Being With Others: Toward a Psychology of Interdependence](#)

In both these books, John McGee asks us to critically evaluate our posture in interacting with persons with mental retardation. Our purpose should be to teach the person that there is ‘value and goodness inherent in human interactions, human presence and human participation’. This cannot occur if we rely on punishment to control and/or to obtain submission.

How is this bonding accomplished? The care giver needs to provide ‘noncontingent valuing’ (i.e., communicate to the person in as many ways as possible that s/he has worth regardless of momentary behavior, that this worth does not need to be earned).

As the title of John McGee’s second book suggests, the goal of treatment is not independence but ‘interdependence’; the goal is not to teach the person total self reliance, but to teach the person how to enjoy participating with others. I would argue that the most functional skill we can teach anyone is how to ask someone else for help.

When people first hear about Gentle Teaching, they usually think “I do that, I care, I value the mentally retarded”. As an approach to the behavior management of severe behaviors, however, Gentle Teaching is a lot more than just ‘caring’. It is a rather intensive and dramatic procedure in which the person is flooded with positive valuing statements and actions regardless of any negative behavior (even spitting in their face). In Gentle Teaching, the care giver is asked to ‘turn the other cheek’ (my metaphor, not McGee’s) and keep returning with more positives.

When I first heard about the approach, I must admit to being rather resistive (What do you mean, they don’t need to earn anything?). I must also admit that the more I read and study John McGee’s works the more value and application I find for what he is saying. I am not a disciple of John McGee’s, but I am forever critically re-evaluating my posture in providing services to persons with mental retardation.

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