

Choose To *Celebrate*!



SHOW your appreciation!

One of the most wonderful gifts a special child offers the world is a new level of appreciation. Learning, growth, and development are so miraculous, and yet we often do not think twice about what is happening. We take it all for granted. We assume that it is the same for everyone. Too often we judge the individual when differences or difficulties are experienced.

Celebrate v. To observe an event with respect, festivities, or rejoicing.

The Time is Now The following is a personal experience from my early teaching days (one I wish I could go back and change.) It was an event that occurred towards the end of the school year with a 5 year old, non-verbal boy diagnosed with autism named Sean. First a teensy bit of background...

Breaking It Down A common strategy in Special Education is "breaking down" tasks. The goals and objectives are broken down

to see where the child is experiencing difficulty, and hopefully help find ways to help him/her be successful. Seemingly basic daily activities, such as the process of "hand-washing", theoretically can be made easier for the child by separating the steps, vs. simply saying "wash your hands." For Sean, this indeed was his I.E.P (Individual Education Plan) goal. The steps were broken down to:

Goal: Sean will wash his own hands independently.

Objectives: Sean will

1. Reach for the faucet
2. Turn the handle to turn water on
3. Put hands in the water
4. Get soap
5. Rub hands together to form lather
6. Rinse soap off
7. Turn off water
8. Dry hands
9. Throw towels in the garbage

Deceptively Simple As you can see when you break down everyday tasks, there are countless comprehension, problem-solving, and physical skills that must be mastered before one becomes "successful" at the full process. For kids experiencing extreme challenges, it can all seem so overwhelming. Often, unknowingly, we make it even harder... even with the best of intentions. Sean made this very clear to me one day, as you will read next.



Learning how to wash hands is not easy for everyone
Photo from [WATER](#)

Sean “Speaks” Towards the end of the school year, we went to the bathroom once again to work on Sean’s hand-washing goal. Every day the scenario looked something like this: Sean would come out from using the bathroom and approach the sink. I would say “Reach for the faucet” which Sean did, hesitantly. Each time he’d briefly touch the faucet, then immediately draw his hand back and rub his hands together. I’d say, “turn it” and show him by turning the faucet on, then turning it back off. I’d instruct him again “reach and turn it.” He’d repeat the same hesitant touch while looking towards the floor, appearing hyped and anxious rubbing his hands together. Usually what occurred next is I’d physically hand-over-hand help Sean move through each step, telling him what to do. Not today. We’d done this all year. Today, I wanted him to at least get through step two independently. I decided to get firm. “Sean, TURN the faucet!” I said as sternly as possible. As always he touched and drew back. “C’mon Sean, you have to TURN IT!” I barked, my annoyance obvious. His response sent a chill through my soul. Sean looked straight up at me with wide, serious eyes piercing through his thick glasses and slapped himself across the face quite hard. What he could not say with words was very clear to me that day, “Listen, lady, I’m doing the best I can here. Sorry if it’s not good enough to please you.”

A Better Way I left the bathroom that day determined to find a more effective approach. Surely Sean had the physical capabilities to maneuver through the hand-washing steps. How could I support him better? I had demonstrated what to do at least 100 times or more. What could I have done differently? Well I now know there are LOTS of more positive approaches I

could have tried. One of the biggest of these would have been celebrating Sean "as is."

When it is obvious that the goals cannot be reached, don't adjust the goals, adjust the action steps ~Confucius

Shifting Focus What was there to celebrate? At the time I wasn't aware of what there was to celebrate. Why? Because I was focused on what was **not** happening instead of what was. Sean was using the bathroom independently. He was coming out and approaching the sink. He was listening to my instructions. He was reaching for the faucet and touching it. He was allowing me to assist him hand-over-hand. He was staying there, trying to cooperate with something his teacher deemed important. He was doing the best he could in that moment. Looking back, I now see there was so much I could've expressed my excitement and appreciation about, and by doing so may have assisted Sean in breaking through the point in which he appeared stuck.



What makes YOU light up like a Christmas Tree?

The Power of Celebrating We often unknowingly celebrate events we don't want to continue. We seem to automatically attend to what we fear most. I now realize that I was as stuck as Sean in the way my focus was unconsciously on my fear of my own inability to help him learn to wash his hands independently. The wonderful

staff at [Son-Rise®](#) have helped me see how this works through many very challenging times with my son, Jake. One example was the time he went through a feces smearing period.

Learning What Works (and What Doesn't) Each night after we'd put Jake to bed, we'd have to check on him numerous times before he'd finally fall asleep. The first night it happened my response was pretty predictable. My eyes widened in horror as I gasped at the sight of the poo-painted wall. "CLIIIIFFFF!!!" I called immediately, and my husband immediately came upstairs giving an equally energetic response. After a week or so of continuous evening cleaning frenzies and us firmly lecturing Jake on how he could not continue doing this, feeling frazzled and defeated, I called Son-Rise® for help. After describing the scenario the consultant immediately pointed out, "So, it sounds as though Jake has figured out a consistent way to get both his parents lit up like Christmas Trees every evening." Sure enough, devising a plan which included us deliberately minimizing our energy to make our response as low-key and boring as possible gradually ended our nightly poo parties.

Attention n. Concentration of the mental powers upon something.

Re-wiring Our Buttons How is a high energy, negative reaction a "celebration" ? A child with social/relating challenges, such as a child diagnosed with autism, is innocently exploring the cause and effect of her actions. When our reactions aren't helping a situation it helps to consider our own. The power is in the focusing of our energy or our **attention**. Becoming aware of what lights us up like Christmas trees can help us discover where we are focusing our mental powers. The great news is, *with conscious effort*, we can shift our attention to celebrate what we want more of vs. attending to the things we don't want. Shifting our mental powers in this way has at least three wonderful benefits:

1. It make us more aware so we can increase our potential to reinforce the behaviors we are wanting from the child in a fun, encouraging way. With this awareness we can also discontinue "celebrating" the things we don't want by toning down our response.
2. It helps the child become aware of what other people are wanting, and makes it more motivating for him/her to keep trying. The child discovers his/her power by the feedback the world gives him/her, so where we focus our energy is especially important.
3. It makes interactions more positive and productive for both parties by building a mutual trust and respect through genuine appreciation.

Does it work? It certainly stacks the cards in your favor. Whenever something is challenging for any of us, we are more likely to stick with it if a caring person encourages us and helps us find ways to develop the skills required. As in Sean's case, had I acknowledged his efforts and pointed out to him that I noticed how hard he was *trying*, this may have boosted his spirits to try with more vigor. If I would have noticed that turning that faucet seemed to be extra challenging for him, I could have brainstormed motivating ways to help him learn the physical skills required to get that faucet turn i.e. clear jars with easy to turn lids and fun objects inside... or perhaps a "faucet turning party" with all the kids lined up across the bathroom turning the sinks on and off to a song. We could've showed Sean we all believed in him and made the challenge lighter and more fun.

*When one is out of touch with oneself, one cannot touch others ~
Anne Morrow Lindbergh*

Detours and Roadblocks to Celebrating What stops us from celebrating what we are wanting more of? Many things. Here's a few:

1. **We do not know what we want.** Often we know what we *don't* want from the child, but what **do** we want? Sometimes we know the big picture we'd like to see, but aren't open to learning the necessary steps to get there. As with Sean with the hand-washing, my want was for him to "wash his hands." I was at the top of the staircase (see chapter 6) vs. celebrating the step he was on and encouraging him to take just that next step. In order to do that, I would have to reflect on what that next step might look like... maybe it was to grip the faucet, maybe to turn the faucet, I'm not sure. Had I been aware of how to truly break things down for Sean, I could have focused my attention on finding out where he needed more practice.
2. **We focus on our own shortcomings or discomfort.** Definitely the case with Sean and I, as a teacher I felt like a first-class flop. Such a simple task, and we had made no progress all year. Learning to celebrate myself, how much I cared, and my own willingness to *try* - as well as celebrating Sean - would have helped me develop appreciation and focus my attention in more productive, positive ways.
3. **We are not happy with things as they are.** We are depending on outside events - such as the child's behavior - to "make" us happy. The child with significant challenges has enough on their plate. Our happiness is not their responsibility. As Sean demonstrated clearly, the pressure to perform for someone else's sake does not feel good. *Wanting* something is different than *needing* something in order to be happy. Trying to manipulate others with our unhappiness short-changes our ability to celebrate the

relationship. Taking responsibility for ourselves -both our moods and our behaviors - helps us to be able to celebrate freely.

TRULY Breaking It Down Once we are aware of what we want, we can begin to celebrate the seeds - the starting points. Breaking things down for children with special needs is more than breaking a task into individual steps. It is also breaking down our own awareness to appreciate exactly where the child is, then when can enthusiastically encourage him/her to keep trying to take that very next step. Celebrating the brief glances of a child who is not yet able to attend, the sounds of a child who is not yet saying words, the beginning efforts no matter how slight can help the child become conscious and more confident of his/her own control over his/her world. As we grow in our awareness and ability to control our focus away from our fears (which so often paralyze us), we help the child grow more autonomous as well. As motivation and comfort levels increase, both parties begin breaking through those "stuck" points.

Celebrating Jake Learning to celebrate my own severely challenged kid has been a journey of enlightenment for both of us. I'm not perfect at it, by any means, but I've improved immensely over the years. I've learned to forgive myself quickly and learn from the times I fall short. (In other words -I'm **trying!** WOOT! WOOT!) I'll conclude this section by sharing a tiny window of what celebrating my child looked and felt like when I first learn how to appreciate him without needing anything in return...

Reclaiming Our Power Jake was totally encased in his own world, pacing back and forth the bedroom, corner to corner, at a quick pace. I was grateful to be spending time with him. The room was quiet other than the

sound of his feet pattering the floor, and I joined his fun. I strived to match his speed and mannerisms as I paced the opposite direction. I got excited thinking about the possibility that he might notice me and see how much I wanted to be with him. Occasionally he flicked his fingers beside his eyes, so I flicked my fingers beside my eyes. Sometimes he made sounds in the forms of grunts or hums, so I did too. Every thing he did was potentially a point in which we could connect, something I knew I wanted very much. This pacing and flicking together without words continued for over 20 minutes when suddenly Jake stopped and looked at me – I stopped too. My face lit up into a huge smile as we made eye contact. He looked at my hand that I had held up, now froze, in the flicking position. I nodded and looked at his hand as he turned his head and noticed. Staring directly at his own hand, he flicked his fingers then quickly looked to my hand which I immediately flicked saying, “YES! You are so smart Jake! I’m doing exactly what you are doing!” He looked down to the floor smiling and went back to running back and forth. I immediately joined him, thrilled with the exchange we just shared and excited wondering how we’d connect next...

Joy is a mindset (James 1: 2-3)

Joy is your strength (Nehemiah 8:10)

Ways to Celebrate This is the fun part! The ways are endless. The most important thing is that you *genuinely* feel enthusiastic and express that excitement in some way, shape or form. Have fun. Experiment. **PLAY!** Sure, changing yourself may feel foreign at first. You may feel as wobbly as a kid learning to ride a bike. You may have even fall off that bike a few times. Keep getting back on, because the freedom of appreciating and feeling joyous cannot be beat! The more powerful you are in the *now*, the more results will occur in the long run. Soon to follow are two printable pages of cheers and encouraging words to get you started ☺

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You're trying!	You Go!	That's funny!
Alright!	Good Job!	Ta-Dah!
Yeah!	That-a-way!	Thank-You!
Way to Go!	WOW!	Woo-Hoo!
Excellent!	Hot Dog!	Wonderful!
Fantastic!	Yee-Ha!	Terrific!
Yay!	YYEESS!	Cool beans!
There we go!	Fabulous!	Look at that!
Super!	Nice!	Good one!
Cha-Ching!	Well done!	Yippeeee!
Hooray!!	Hallelujah!	Amazing!
I love it!	Hey Hey!	You the BEST!
Muy Bueno!	Awesome!	Too Cool!
Good one!	Sweeeet!	Impressive!
Ah-Hah!	You've got it!	Beautiful!
Glorious!	Perfect!	I like that!
Bravo!	You Rock !	Happy-Day!
Good for you!	Wow-wee!	Stupendous!
I appreciate that!	Zip-a-dee-doo-da!	OK!

Actions:

Thumbs up	Gaping mouth
Smile and Nod	Fists to the air
The Butter Churn	Whistle
Clap	Star Wars Theme song

You're smokin' hot!
Remarkable!
Spectacular!
You're kickin' booty!
You're the BOMB!
Genius!
You the man!
Incredible!
Glorious!
Marvelous!
Brilliant!
You're doin' it!!
Look at you!
You've got it!
Oh yeah!
That's gotta feel great!
C'mon, let's see..

What a smarty!!
Voila!
Da-dada-DA!!
You can do it!
Believe it!!!
Woot!! Woot!!
Outstanding!
Ba-da-BING!
Perfect!
Look at that!
Woah!
Oh my Goodness!
I know you can!
Keep at it!
You're working hard!
Super!
No worries, you will..

Actions:

Celebration dance
Howl like a wolf
Rocky theme song
Stamp feet

Spell out name in a cheer
Make train whistle sound
High five
Fist bumps