

Service, Support and Success
The Direct Support Workers Newsletter

**For No Reason
Managing the Power to Refuse**

By: Dave Hingsburger

“No.”

“No!!”

“NO!”

No matter the tone you use, no matter the font you use, ‘no’ is a pretty powerful word. For many years, we have been actively teaching people that ‘no means no’ and that ‘no’ is to be respected. This has always been in the context of self-protection, self-esteem and self-awareness. You need to be able to say ‘no’ in order to effectively say ‘yes.’ That message is still one that people, not just those with disabilities, need to hear. We all could have better lives if we were a little quicker on the ‘no’ trigger.

No: The Dark Side

However, ‘no’ has a dark side. The ‘Darth No,’ if you will. ‘No’ is a word, given to those in positions of power over others, which can have an intoxicating effect. Frankly, it can feel good to say ‘no’ to someone else, to deny someone’s request, to be able to thwart someone’s plans. No one ever sets out to become ‘no addicted,’ but power has an odd way of changing how we see things.

This article is based on the premise that “no” is said too often, and for the wrong reasons, by care providers. This means care providers of anyone. A study done by UCLA showed that the average toddler hears the word ‘no’ 400 times a day. A day!! This is because, as they reported, often no was said in multiples, “No, no, no, I said, no!” It’s said so often, it becomes meaningless and becomes, instead, something that simply indicates the wanton assertion of power. There is nothing really to distinguish the ‘no’ that’s said for the candy bar at the mall, and the ‘no’ that’s said to stop the same person from stepping in front of a car.



Hands

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No needs to mean no.

No should only be said when it means no.

No should never be about power, it should only be about danger.

Why?

“No” Hurts

Did you know that scientists who have studied the brain have discovered what they call a ‘negativity bias’ in the brain? The brain ‘feels’ negative responses more than it does positive ones. The brain reacts painfully to ‘no’ ... or to other negative responses. Have you ever noticed that you remember and focus on negative feedback much more keenly than you do positive feedback? Well, that’s normal! It’s because the brains reacts strongly and painfully to the negative, and only mildly to the positive. “No” hurts. And because it hurts, we need to be careful when we use it.

“Why? Because I Said So”

All of us remember having a parent explain the reason for their use of the word ‘no’ to refuse a request by saying, “Why? Because I said so.” Even when a child KNOWS that their parents are rushed or frustrated, the incredible unfairness of the situation creates a mammoth sense of powerlessness. And ‘powerlessness’ is the right word because ‘do it because I said it’ is a statement about the personal power of the speaker and the speaker’s belief that no other reason is needed. If “Because I said so,” is the reason for your ‘no,’ then you know you’ve gone off track.

So here goes, I asked a group of direct support staff to give me examples and situations where they’ve misused the word ‘no’. They were shy at first but then became very brave and gave me a bunch:

1) No because of a bad day

This may be the most common reason that a care provider might say ‘no’ to even the most reasonable request is that they, themselves, aren’t having a very good day. There can be an unwitting tendency to share the bad day with others. This is the kind of thing that can then spiral down in a way that just makes a bad day worse. Learning to spot when you’re having a bad day is a good first step. Then drawing a line between your bad day or bad mood or bad hair day, and your responsibility to the people you support is the next logical step. A well placed, ‘Yes, good idea!’ can not only make the day of someone you support, but make your bad day better.

2) No just because you can

A staff confessed to me, many years ago, when we were talking about the power to refuse and the overabundance of ‘no for no reason’ experiences of people with disabilities, “I don’t want to admit this but, when I first started, I was so young. It was my first job. I was just out of school. Then they gave me, without any real training, a position where I thought my job was to keep control of a group of men who lived in a group home. A lot of times I said, ‘no’ because I could. I didn’t think about it. But when I did think about it, I realized it made me feel important, it made me feel powerful. I liked it. That scared me. I think having and using the power to refuse, the power to say ‘no’ is addictive because it fuels our sense of importance.” I thought her observations more than brave and I thought them wise. We can all learn from her confession – power has qualities that make it addictive.

3) No because it's not to your tastes

So, you don't like that kind of movie. So, you don't like that kind of food. So, you don't like sports. So, you don't like loud music. So ... So? Remember, it's not YOUR day. It's not YOUR time. It's not YOUR tastes in entertainment or activities that matters. Saying 'no' because you don't like what's been freely chosen is a violation of one of the major boundaries of support providing. That boundary? The one between me and you. Your job is to encourage and support the individual with becoming who they are, using your 'no' to discourage someone's interest or choice is so ethically suspect that you need to really give yourself a shake. Whoa! Back up!! You are here to provide service not to dictate terms!!

4) No because you don't feel like doing it

You know how, when you are at home on the couch, you think to yourself, "I just don't feel like getting up and going out like I planned. I think I'll just stay home and watch T.V." You know why you get to do that? Because you are at home. Because no one is paying you to get off your couch. But when you come to work, no matter how comfortable you feel, "It's just like my second home," it's work. You are at work. And your job, amazingly is to make home work for people. So, tired or not, motivated or not, if you're up to go to an event, you need to be up and going. Right now I'm not feeling particularly motivated to finish typing this sentence but, you'll notice, I finished. That's because I'm at work!!

5) No because you don't like the person asking

Though no one likes to talk about this, we, none of us, like every single person we serve. There are those we like better than others. There are those we like less than others. Awareness of this comes from the ability to say it out loud, to yourself, and hopefully with your co-workers or your supervisor. When you like someone more than others, you can ignore warning signs that can lead to really serious problems. When you like someone less, you can be needlessly harsh in your evaluations and be less likely to step forward and step up, with a yes in your mouth, when the person has a simple request to make. This is where being professional matters. This is where you test your ability to be fair. Really fair. Passing that test matters, in way more ways than just being good at your job! It becomes about how you live your life and the legacy you will leave.

6) No because it offends your moral compass

"But I don't agree with dancing. I think it is sinful." We live in such a time of diversity, and diversity is wonderful. It brings a lot of points of view and a lot of ideas into a workplace. Diversity means that we all have to know how to be ourselves, express our own differences, in ways that do not infringe upon other's rights and other's choices. If you don't agree with dancing, don't dance. It doesn't mean then that you have the right to tell someone you won't take them to a dance. You aren't going to a dance; you are supporting someone at a dance. There's a huge difference between those things. Supporting someone to go to a church that you don't believe in or whose beliefs you disagree with is not the same as attending the church yourself. What you do to support someone is simply work, it isn't endorsement, it isn't anything more than it is. It can be hard to see the difference between 'supporting at' and 'going to' but the difference is huge.

7) No because of a false reason

I don't think it's fair that s/he gets extra time, all the people who live/work here are equally important. Why do they get to go for a walk? Why do they get to have an extra coffee? Why? It's not fair to the other residents. It's not fair to the other workers. These are the kinds of concerns that come up, most often, when someone is on a behaviour program and there are scheduled reinforcers. "I didn't take her out even though she'd earned it because I didn't think it was fair to the others in the house." Typically, here, we have someone who really disagrees with a reward program designed by a Behaviour Therapist and instead of challenging the fact that rewards are being given, the disagreement is phrased in terms of other people's rights. It's true other people's rights are important, and if someone is on a reward program to reduce things like, say, aggression ... the other people being served are most probably thinking: "Take him out. Give her extra coffee. Just get the darned behaviour under control so we can live peaceably here." If you are going to disagree, don't do it by saying no to someone who doesn't have control of the situation. Bring it up, discuss it, have your point heard.

8) No because you are mad at someone else (why do I have to do it?)

Your co-worker always leaves the shopping to you. It's not fair. You may resent it. This is, without question, something that needs to be dealt with within the team of people who work at your location or who support the person or people you support. It is not something that should lead you to bad tempered responses to reasonable requests. "Put that back, it's not on the list!!!" "No, you can't buy that ... Why? Because I said so!" OK, you are mad at a co-worker. But directing your anger towards someone you support is an unacceptable outcome of team tension. Remembering that you are feeling pain as a result of the negativity in interactions with others may prompt you to how 'no's' feel and remind you not to inflict that kind of pain on someone else.

9) No because you want to get back at the person

Sometimes what we do takes superhuman effort. When we've worked with someone who has aggressed towards us, spat at us, or called us horrific names, it's natural to have a lot of feelings in response to those behaviours. A lot. Even after debriefing and even after a time thinking about it and the job you do and why it's important and how it wasn't meant personally, those feelings can remain. Then later when someone, who has physically or verbally hurt you in the past, asks for your help or asks to do something, go somewhere or get something, suddenly the power to say no, the power to refuse is in your hands. What you do next is, again, a test of training and a test of character.

10) No because no has always been the answer

Sometimes 'no' becomes a ritual. 'No' has always been the answer for someone, therefore, 'no' will always be the answer. Sometimes it's really important to see if the reason behind the 'no' is still there. A woman was deathly afraid of dogs and she never remembered that there was a big dog living next door who was always out in the back yard. When she asked to go out into the back yard, the answer was, simply, "No." The staff knew, and reminded her that the dog really frightened her. Years passed, and like a country song, the dog died, the neighbours divorced, the house sold. And still, they were saying "No," to the request to go outside. Once a staff looked back through the files to see why they were saying no, she was shocked to see that for over five years there had been no real reason to refuse. She sent a note to all staff who worked in the house: Dog Dead, Yes to Outside!

So those are ten of the reasons that the staff I talked to have used the power to refuse, the power to 'no' someone. You can see from the list that those who helped me create this list, from across many agencies, did a lot of deep introspection and were really honest in their evaluation of the times where they have 'no-ed' for the wrong reasons. Perhaps you have other reasons or made different mistakes. But the most important thing to realize is that:

“No” hurts.

And therefore it should be used carefully.

About the Author

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