

11 Stoic Pragmatism for Parenting a Child with Disabilities

An Essay Addressing Philosophers, Parents, Teachers, and Educational Policymakers

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A common American parental norm is to want a better life for one's children. American pragmatism, both in a colloquial sense and in a technical philosophical sense, inclines toward or sometimes champions a practical ideal of optimistic striving for constant, incremental improvement, even if interrupted by setbacks. Becoming a parent involves an inevitable set of risks about matters beyond our control, however, to which few imagine themselves to be subject. When one has a child who suffers a life-altering injury or debilitating illness, all of one's life goals can seem insignificant in comparison with the will to heal or help him, her, or them. Yet, all the money, will, and positive thinking one can muster may be powerless to redress the harm done by a neonatal stroke, which my daughter suffered in 2007 before developing a debilitating form of epilepsy with lifelong consequences. All parents lack control of some aspects of their children's lives, yet the hope that a child's life might be better or at least even similar to one's own is jarring for the parent whose child cannot walk, speak, read, or even eat food by mouth. Beyond the traditional American parenting norm, a number of philosophical tenets also pose challenges to living happily as a parent of a child with disabilities. The first one is the idea that, as Aristotle claimed, man is the rational animal. The second is the earlier Socratic proclamation that the unexamined life is not worth living. Each of these poses challenges not only for happiness, but as Martha Nussbaum (2006) has argued in her book *Frontiers of Justice*, also for justice. Human beings design our world for the average person and only recently has an ideal of "universal design" begun to emerge. That means that most of the world is not designed for all of us. Confronting these challenges as a parent of a child with disabilities, I have found John Lachs's "stoic pragmatism" to be the most helpful outlook for thinking both about stoic acceptance of what is beyond our control, combined with a modest yet hopeful optimistic

pragmatism about what we might do to be happy despite challenges. In this essay, I will explain the challenges I see in the three norms or tenets mentioned so far, and then argue that an outlook like stoic pragmatism represents a most promising point of view from which parents of children with disabilities might pursue happy lives for themselves, their families, and their society. This outlook additionally suggests principles and implications for practice and policy relevant to the work of teachers, administrators, and policymakers.

Three Tough Ideas for Parents of Children with Disabilities

American philosopher John Dewey, profoundly inspired by Darwin's evolutionary theory, believed that communication and ideas are human beings' two most powerful tools for coping with their environments and thriving as a species, a view he called instrumentalism. He also thought that ideas that were considered helpful at an earlier point in time may not be well suited for different times, as environments and living conditions change. The Socrates of Plato's *Republic*, for example, called for eliminating imperfect children, leaving them to die of exposure, in order to ensure a stronger, more physically defensible, and virtuous society (1992b, 460c). Such norms today appear cruel and are not often entertained but by the harshest politicians and pundits.¹ Philosophers like Peter Singer have argued in defense of the permissibility of terminating children who have had no capability of "knowing what existence is," a different point of view some find cruel while others find reasonable (2013, 260). In this section, I will review the three norms that pose challenges for parents of children with disabilities to consider to what extent our old ideas either need to be abandoned or revised, in light of conditions for which they are less helpful or positively harmful, at least without revision.

A Life Better than Our Own

The idea that parents often want their kids to have a better life than their own is surely not uniquely American. The foundation, A Better Life for Children, established in 2012, strives to improve the lives of children in the Congo and Madagascar, for example.² The mission of A Better Life for Kids aims to advance child well-being in Ghana.³ Such organizations abound today and appeal to donors on the basis of the idea that people all should care about the lives of children and strive to alleviate suffering and ensure a brighter future, as we say, for the next generation. The norm of wanting better for one's children likely relates to the ideal of social mobility. The common story of a parent or grandparent having to endure great challenges, walking to work in the snow, uphill both

ways, as the joke runs, explains that past hardships were endured so that the next generation may have better. Such norms might typically be economic in nature, yet a mother who suffered intimate partner violence may wish for her children not to endure it too, whatever the family's economic status.

Some rare cases spark controversy, when parents with disabilities wish to have children with like disabilities (Murphy 2009, 43–49). Critics of such prospective parents might have in mind the norm of wanting better for one's children. Defenders might note that if the parents' lives are happy, wanting their children to be like them is a related norm, as it wishes happiness upon them of the kind familiar to the parents. Such cases are complex interweavings of different facets of the ideal of wanting what is best for one's children and wanting their lives to be better. For, if a child who grows up blind has parents who also are vision-impaired, the child can be guided by parents with a deep and intimate experience. My aim is not to defend or criticize either of such parents, but to highlight the ways in which the norm of wanting better for one's children in a way underlies a great variety of positions with regard to parenting children, including those with disabilities.

A number of implications can be drawn from the idea of wanting better for one's children. Things that contribute to happiness in many people's lives include having one or more loving parents or guardians, pursuing life goals, such as in education and careers, finding love, and building a family. One of the most basic among these, so often taken for granted, is the joy of breaking bread as a family.

Eating food is basic. There is something wonderful about the simplicity of alleviating a baby's hunger pangs with a bottle. Seeing an innocent child's relief and glee over a full belly is one of life's joys. Some children, such as my daughter, never learn to eat by mouth. In her case, she was mostly asleep for her first month of life on a strong antiseizure medication, which led to her not learning to suckle from a bottle. Nearly all her calories are taken in by means of a tube that connects to a button affixed to her stomach. Parents can alleviate hunger pangs by means of a tube, rather than a bottle, yet so many of the rich joys of my life have involved delicious French cooking and beloved family recipes. My daughter can taste some of these to a limited degree, yet the idea of sharing the joys of food and great cooking is one basic area in which I never thought I would encounter a gap of experience and shared joy with my child. And that is just about eating. More can be said about how challenging feeding can be, such as in a child who fails to thrive, returning food delivered by tube at each meal, which was a very difficult part of our experience, but we were fortunate to get past that challenge after a year. Others are not as fortunate. This is one of the most basic examples of challenges that a parent might never expect to have to face.

The next basic challenge to happiness for a parent of a child with disabilities concerns relationships. Disability is an incredibly broad concept,

so in this case, I mean to focus on forms that are deep and intellectual, especially concerning persons who might reasonably be thought unable to consent. Consent is a very difficult concept for a parent of a child with deep cognitive impairments. After all, my daughter can affirm with a clap-clap, or deny either with a hair rubbing kind of whine or nonresponse. In that way, she can say “yes” or “no.” On the one hand, I can say that she is very intelligent, because sometimes she can respond to questions in ways that seem consistent after differentially phrased yes or no questions. But, just as consent is very difficult to ensure for persons without cognitive impairments (Mayo and Wallhagen 2009, 103–111), it can seem considerably more controversial when a person’s nonstandard communicative signing is differentially interpretable or inconsistent over time. Thus, a basic worry is about whether one’s child can truly understand and commit him or herself. I remember watching a television commercial in 2007 in which a young woman was thinking with incredible joy about her upcoming wedding. In an instant, I was devastated, realizing soon after that I could not imagine an answer to whether my daughter might one day be in a position to get married. Of course, a person can be happy without getting married, but to have that option precluded from someone’s life through no fault of their own making is the omission of a life option that same-sex couples recently argued successfully in court is a central matter of choice for happy lives.⁴ She may never get married.

Finally, so many parents either suffer from empty nest syndrome or revel in the joy that they have completed their task of parenting their children, who are all out of the house. It is more common today for kids to return home after college or to live with family if they start work immediately instead. Either way, there is a common sense that children should be enabled to fly off from the nest if they wish to, and a corresponding norm that kids will help and take care of their parents later on in life. My wife and I have many times heard people tell us that having our daughter be 12 years old must mean that she can now be a big help around the house. At first, we did not know what to say. No one really wants to hear how wrong they are about such off-handed remarks. My wife Annie came up with the gentle response that “She would if she could” and we generally succeed at leaving the matter there.⁵ The further point here is that it can be hard to imagine a happy reason why our daughter would venture off to live on her own, independently of us or other loved ones. There are institutions that can help to enable children with disabilities to live on their own, and to care for them when parents’ circumstances cannot allow for proper and needed care. The idea of the little bird venturing off and taking flight, however, can be difficult to envision, or seem impossible, which adds another layer to the weight of wanting better for one’s children.

Much more could be said here, but at bottom, it is important for parents of children with disabilities to think about how social norms like

wanting better for one's children can still be meaningful in a way, yet can cause regular pangs of discomfort or sadness in the frequent reminder of how one's child will not enjoy so many of the pleasures that his, her, or their parents have. There is also another danger that can seep into one's character. Regular pains from social interactions can imbitter a person to others because of their casual comments. Taking one's child around in her wheelchair, to places where there are other children, can often yield shocked stares from other children or worse, from other adults. The pleasant effect that beautiful people experience of often encountering others' smiles can be contrasted sharply with the painful feeling of regularly shocked, frowning, locked eyes. Things out of the norm draw one's attention. So, a parent can either grow more unhappy with society or work to remain stolid or joyful, ever ready to educate the next person about a special child. The latter starts out exhausting for often already tired parents, yet habits make things easier, as Aristotle instructed, and this is one insight that John Lachs's stoic pragmatism might urge us to remember.

The Rational Animal

Aristotle is known to have called man the rational animal and the social animal. Parents of children with highly antisocial conditions can find the day-to-day task of raising a child who cannot communicate or engage in the most basic of social behaviors incredibly difficult. We understand personhood in relation to how we commune with others. In daily life, we hear about the importance of the best and brightest, the essential need for education to cultivate intelligence. These things are meaningful and important, and I want the best doctors I can get for my children when in crisis, especially. Yet, what does such thinking mean for how we value a child with disabilities? When a basketball team in Mississippi has needed new jerseys for five years and a child with disabilities might only potentially benefit from a \$3000 communication device, the community often fails to see the point of the latter, even if the covering of that cost could open up a world of possibility for a young person. Other parents' responses might be that if their kids are going to succeed in life, they are going to need that basketball scholarship, which a ratty jersey won't help to obtain. Ironically, in this case, an intellectual investment can be seen as less important intellectually than basketball jerseys, as the latter might gain scholarships for college educations for more people who need them.

The good news today is that things are radically better than they once were. Historically, kids with some forms of disabilities were not thought to be deserving of schooling at all. That meant that not only did such children not go to school, but another consequence that is troubling: "nondisabled" children would be even less likely ever really to see and

get to know those peers with disabilities. Sectioning off students clashes with the values involved in being social animals. Today, my daughter not only goes to school, but is a minor celebrity, as she gets away with occasional loud outbursts that make others laugh, often in a sympathetic fashion. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (I.D.E.A.) opened up possibilities for individualized education plans, furthermore, which seem like a great idea for all children, were the public willing to fund such a strategy, in contrast with ubiquitous standardization.⁶

The pangs of seeing the human being as the rational animal take a number of forms despite some areas of progress. One comes in the form of people's everyday language: "That's stupid." "That's retarded." "You're dumb." People often call an idea or a person stupid for irresponsible judgment, but we do so with the language that has been historically used to describe cognitive disability. Words like stupid, retarded, feeble-minded, and dumb have been used formally to refer to persons with intellectual disabilities (Osgood 2006, 135–145). I have used the language of "cognitive impairment," generally, or of "intellectual disabilities," yet as we know, the body and the brain often find ways of adapting to injuries to compensate and thrive differently from what is standard, such as when a dog learns to run on three legs or when brain tissue near an injury takes over the function that is typically driven by the affected tissue. My daughter's stroke very clearly took place in an area that would affect her right arm, yet she can make use of it in a variety of ways that significantly enable her engagement with things in the world. We might similarly have a number of intellectual or cognitive forms of adaptation that typical people are simply unable to recognize. I regularly tell people how smart I understand my daughter to be, as the average person has not seen the signs of intelligence that I have seen her exhibit.

In concrete policy, 19 states in the U.S. continue to practice corporal punishment in public schools, including Mississippi and Kentucky, where we have lived. Kids most targeted by corporal punishment are African Americans and children with disabilities (Gershoff and Font 2016). It is thought that you cannot reason with a child with disabilities, particularly those with cognitive impairments, so parents, teachers, and therapists sometimes use behavior conditioning tools, just as one can with dogs and other trainable animals. It has been our experience with every new caregiver that our daughter's pinching has been thought at first to be a mean or undesirable behavior. Until other methods of communication are found, however, it is tragic to fail to see a soft pinch or a gentle scratch as a means of communicating some kind of dissatisfaction, sadness, or pain. Insisting that a child not pinch, without finding an alternative mechanism to express himself or herself about such feelings is an example of failing to appreciate a child's intelligence. So, because we see disabled young people often as cognitively impaired, whether what we are noticing is due to that impairment or some other cause, we can

easily fail to recognize their real intelligence and efforts to be rational and communicative through the limited means available to some. We exacerbate the challenges of disability, then, through our lack of effort or our ignorance and inability to understand nonstandard communicative efforts.⁷

The Unexamined Life Is Not Worth Living

A norm that precedes but relates to Aristotle's broader conception of humanity is the Socratic tenet that "the unexamined life is not worth living."⁸ On the one hand, the Western world is indebted to Socrates for his martyrdom on behalf of the pursuit of wisdom and justice. On the other, a potential implication, depending on interpretation, of the Socratic maxim is that a person who cannot examine his or her own life is not living a life worth enduring. The severest cases of cognitive impairment, therefore, lend themselves to Peter Singer's attitude, which justifies termination of life that cannot be called happy, according to his view, particularly if it would feature a great, negative imbalance of pain and pleasure.⁹ In other cases, however, it suggests that things like individual education plans might ideally strive for ways to envision what a meaningful life could be for a person with cognitive impairments. Schools have the I.D.E.A. and policy programming, but parents of children with disabilities might well want to think about what sorts of efforts could allow or enable atypical forms of examinations of one's own life for their children, including those who reach adulthood.

On a surface account of Socrates's outlook, it appears that the severely cognitively impaired life might not be worth living, a troubling position akin to the sort of problem observed in the Aristotelian notion of man as the rational animal. Politicians regularly aim to cut public funding for persons with special needs (Ansberry 2010; Weber 2010), wanting to invest instead in funding or in offering tax cuts to people whose work will promote the greater economic gain, or happiness, a utilitarian argument at best. Such outlooks, of course, fail to acknowledge the economic consequences of public expenditures on the care of persons with disabilities, as relevant funding goes to people and companies who fill needs, thus to economic gain also. A contrasting approach to the economic focus is the view that a society's virtue can be measured with respect to how it treats its most vulnerable people, a different sort of the utilitarian aspect of John Rawls's early work.¹⁰

The most threatening application of the Socratic norm might come from claims of competition and national security. We must prioritize the best and brightest because other countries are doing so and we will diminish in standing otherwise. This is the modern-day version of Plato's argument for terminating imperfect children in the *Republic*, to be strong in anticipation of threats from enemies like Sparta.¹¹ Of course,

too quickly dismissing persons with disabilities might foolishly neglect the brilliance of persons like a relative of mine who was highly disabled yet a code breaker for the National Security Agency. The logic of this response plays into the norm of defending against Sparta, however. The better response is that China's and India's market gains can mean a relative decline in American market shares, but not necessarily in a way that represents a problem or real worsening of conditions in the United States. In fact, the market norms of traditional liberalism suggest that people get better off through competition, more people getting what they want. If the United States wants better living conditions for more of its people, tending to less advantaged people can be just such an aim and the alleviation of poverty in places like India and China can represent a marked improvement in the total quality of life and quantity of happiness in the world.

The question of which life is worth living remains. I do not want to live in a world in which I am unfree to ask questions and examine my life. At the same time, we must also not think that persons with cognitive impairments necessarily lack a life worth living. It is itself a fascinating philosophical question of the examined life to ask what are the ways in which we can strive to enable people to live happy, meaningful lives worth living in conditions of cognitive impairment. In addition, students in my philosophy of education course this fall have suggested to me that examining life can mean many things. The very idea has moved me profoundly and reminded me yet again how much teachers learn from their students.¹² If we take an expansive view of the examined life, we can reduce the sting of this traditional norm for many people, but not all. Then again, reasonable people call for freedom of the choice of euthanasia on the part of designated guardians of persons who live for decades in a vegetative state, as Lachs has argued.¹³ So, this norm involves matters of degree, as do the others here. In the end, what we see in each of the norms addressed here in this section is a set of tensions and challenges for how to think about living a happy and meaningful life despite challenges that butt up against traditional norms for humanity and the pursuit of happiness. The next section will present the outlook that I argue is a powerful tool for being happy in the face of these intellectual and moral challenges.

Stoic Pragmatism and Its Lessons

In this section, I will briefly explain John Lachs's innovative outlook referred to as "stoic pragmatism," and then present four key guiding insights that I have drawn from it and suggest for parents, teachers, administrators, and educational policymakers to keep in mind as opportunities to enable greater happiness despite unusual and profound challenges.

What Is Stoic Pragmatism?

In 2005, John Lachs published his essay, “Stoic Pragmatism,” in which he explained that “pragmatic ambition and stoic equanimity appear to be incompatible values” (2005, 95). This is because the tradition of American philosophical Pragmatism extols “the possibility of improving our circumstances,” the “ideal of meeting all needs.” By contrast, the stoics argued that “The key to living well [...] is control over self, not over circumstance, and they embrace inner calm in the face of whatever misfortune befalls us” (Lachs 2005, 95). In the face of this evident tension, Lachs proposes bringing “the two views closer together than it has been supposed possible” (2005, 96). Lachs takes on a Deweyan kind of instrumentalism here. Whereas Dewey is typically thought of as referring to some ideas that become outmoded given new developments, Lachs here notes that the matter of time need not be so broad for differences in the usefulness of ideas to change. Just as there are seasons in life, there are periods in which certain attitudes are more useful than others. He explains that “there are times at which the pragmatic attitude is inappropriate and good sense requires that pragmatists believe and act like stoics. If intelligent pragmatists have to be stoics from time to time, then pragmatism and stoicism are not incompatible after all” (Lach 2005, 96).

A common misconception about Stoicism, Lachs notes, is the belief that stoics are quietist, inactive. They accept what they cannot change, while activists want to change what they cannot accept, as the saying goes.¹⁴ The point Lachs makes is that stoics, like everyone else, do not know all of the reach of their powers. How can you know what you cannot change unless you try? And, trying is within one’s power. So, trying is something that Stoicism can condone, if not endorse, in the effort to determine what is within one’s power. When our trials encounter failure, however, our reaction to such results can enable our happiness or frustrate it.

The fact that neither Stoics nor optimistic Pragmatists know all that is in our power might aggravate a nonstoic activist. In Lachs’s book named after the article, *Stoic Pragmatism*, he explains that “The first great lesson of philosophy is that we must learn to live with uncertainty” (2012, 13). On this score, we should take a page from the Stoics’ book. It is beyond our power to know fully the scope of our powers and limits. Accepting the fact of our finitude is therefore necessary for happiness.

Elsewhere, I have argued that a democratic conception of justice should be understood as an evolving, regulative ideal (2015). That means in part that the work of justice is the pursuit of an ideal, and one which can never be perfectly achieved in life. Thus, there is always more to do. Given that, in one sense, no matter what our successes, we can always believe that we fall short. Lachs cautions against what he calls “infinite

obligations.” To expect a person to achieve the infinite in a finite life is to want the impossible. That, according to the stoics, is a recipe for misery. It means, then, that if we are to be happy, the only way forward will be in the appreciation of incremental progress and improvement. He writes, “Up to a point, life gets better in proportion to our ability to get absorbed in the immediate” (2012, 192). Lachs does also note, however, that it is important not to adopt a Stoic attitude too soon or too quickly. He explains that “stoic equanimity has hardened me against disaster from an early age. I am careful, however, not to employ it too soon or as an alternative to energetic assault upon the world, rather than as a final stance after every effort has failed” (2012, 192).

When it comes to parenting a child with disabilities, there are matters beyond our control, as there are with parenting any child. What the context of children with disabilities does is to shock parents into the need to adjust our understanding of the kinds of things that may be beyond our control. In our very conceptions of having children, we can imagine things that our parents did for us, such as the slideshow at our wedding. Persons with cognitive impairments can get married, but some cannot consent to the marriage contract. Basic expectations about things you want to do with your kids need to be let go or approached differently if they are not to be sources of pain and sadness.

The part we rarely hear about stoics that I would add here concerns the practice it takes to become a stoic. Americans are understood to be “bright-sided,” optimistic people (Ehrenreich 2010). So, the Pragmatic attitude comes more naturally to most in the United States. Stoicism, by contrast, can take a great deal of work and practice. Telling ourselves the things that Stoicism teaches demands repetition for impact. It requires practice when we are confronted with frustration or failure. In time, however, I can anecdotally report that stoicism has made a great difference in my life, though its acceptance is something I aim always only to keep as a last resort, as Lachs instructs. In that spirit, I will conclude this essay with four guiding maxims that we might draw from the Stoic Pragmatist outlook for living happily as a parent of a child with disabilities. These aphorisms also point to useful attitudes and concrete policy matters or approaches that could be valuable for teachers, administrators, and educational policymakers.

Four Guiding Maxims and Examples of Their Potential Value

Over the course of this essay, a number of insights either have been mentioned or implied, inspired by a Stoic Pragmatist approach to parenting a child with disabilities. I will explain each one briefly and give an example of how we can think of it playing out in practice and policy.

Think about How Not to Be an Impediment to the Child's Potential

Some lessons are hard to take in. When people of goodwill choose careers like teaching or educational administration, or when people become parents, they usually set out with the ideal at least similar to the one I have mentioned: making others' lives better. Whether we mean to or not, however, sometimes well-intended people and actions can be sources of limitations for kids with disabilities. The first step is to acknowledge the fact. The next step is to take stock of what we do that may unintentionally limit kids. The ways we interpret the actions of kids with disabilities matters and can assume that behaviors are misbehaviors. In addition, if such presumed misbehaviors are met with punishments, ignoring the fact that a message was intended, we teach kids with communicative disabilities to give up on trying to communicate, rather than recognizing that there is a request at work. Instead of rendering pinches and scratches gentle to the point of being inoffensive, leading to questions about what might be wrong, some parents, teachers, therapists, and administrators respond to kids with pinches in return, yelling, hitting, or spanking, suggesting that they should feel pain and shame when they are frustrated over a problem they have. These insights may seem abstract in some cases, but there is one area in which they lead to a clear and concrete policy proposal. For the sake of empowering kids and not turning them against their loved ones and teachers, we must end corporal punishment of kids in schools, especially for children with disabilities. The highly populous, swing-state of Ohio ended corporal punishment in public schools in 2009 (Human Rights Watch 2009). Ohio remains a state with far better educational results than Mississippi or Alabama, which both continue to use corporal punishment (Stebbins and Frohlich 2018).

Remake the World to Welcome Our Kids with Disabilities

Some of the most basic ways in which our world is designed to pose challenges for kids with disabilities. We raise buildings so that when it rains, our floors stay dry. When we do so, however, the use of stairs makes some people unable to enter. When we design our spaces, if we look ahead, not just to the students and teachers we have now, but to the matter of what anyone would need to participate in our spaces and platforms, physical, social, or online, we can intend to welcome everyone, or we can do what we have always done. The latter makes our environments unwelcoming to some. The common response that "we don't have anyone who..." forgets the real moral insight that "if you build it" accessibly, "they will come." Not having kids who need wheelchairs can change from one day to the next. Images that bear text can often not be read by screen readers, but if we mean to make things accessible,

we can make sure our images are either accompanied by text or feature the text in a way that can be read by assistive devices. When we design new buildings, it is tragic to force persons with accessibility challenges to fight for changing structures. It is cheaper to think ahead and be inclusive than to be retrospective about accessibility. And, it is unfair to see the individual as having special needs for accommodation when in fact the choice is made to render spaces inaccessible. What would be fairer would be to see designs as inaccessible. Persons with disabilities are not the source of the problem. Inaccessibly design spaces and systems are. The basic idea, easier said than implemented, is that when we design anything, the humane and responsible thing to do is to strive for universal design. We will fall short, often through ignorance that is difficult or impossible to prevent. But, goodwill and the intent to make our educational institutions and practice accessible go a long way and can minimize the struggle. Plus, if we see that we are all together with the aim of rendering our spaces and educational spheres accessible, we avoid treating persons with disabilities as impositions on others. It is our designs and habits that exclude and limit them.

Rethink What We Mean by a Life Worth Living

There are many kinds of lives, particularly now that medical advances have enabled more people to survive what would have been fatal in past generations. Given the increasing diversity of forms of life experiences, it is all the more important for schools, teachers, administrators, and policymakers to rethink what is meant by a meaningful life. First of all, politicians' focus on economic development often leads to outlooks that see education's value in terms of jobs and economic growth. There surely is reason to value what education does for improving employability and financial outcomes, but that does not mean that education and personal goals must focus on careers and economic aims.¹⁵ Some human beings are simply going to be unable to obtain any kind of employment. Others are seeing growth in jobs like greeters at stores, among many other positions opening up to persons with cognitive impairments. And, Ted Kennedy, Jr. argued persuasively in *The New York Times* that "hiring people with disabilities is good business" (2018).

For many people, the focus on jobs and employment is only of secondary interest to life goals and meaning. In addition, philosophers' interest in an educated society and the freedom of inquiry to study even controversial subjects can remain cherished values even if we expand both the idea of the examined life and openness to outlooks on life that do not focus on the intellect or excellence. Whatever my daughter ends up wanting in life, she can love and be loved. She can spend time with people she loves and enjoys the things she enjoys. She can examine new life opportunities and spend time on things that she wishes to explore.

Even if many ought to be encouraged to go to college, it need not be considered a tragedy if for some people it makes little sense to think in those terms. We simply must be careful about how and when such thinking might be used systematically to undermine the potential of people whose chances of educational attainment are live options.

We are already engaging in some of the efforts needed for the kind of rethinking I have in mind here. For one thing, we should continue teaching kids not to use insensitive language like “retarded” when they mean to refer to something undesirable. We can also call out our politicians when they assess the value of some economic endeavor only on grounds of financial return or job creation. Opening rich and meaningful life opportunities for all is a value in itself and for democracy. Benefits are evident already in the empowerment of fellows who can then pursue different kinds of meaningful lives. In addition, such efforts employ people, which does have economic value, and we typically cannot foresee all the benefits that can come from treating more people with respect for their various inclinations and approaches to the good life. I benefit daily, for example, from text-to-speech applications that read books and articles aloud to me, a development I have as an accessibility feature of my devices, and from which I benefit enormously, though they were not designed for a person like me with excellent vision.

A further effort we engage in already in our schools is the individualized education plan, typically reserved for students in special education. As I noted above, I sincerely believe that there is rich potential for what might be achieved in redressing American education’s excess emphasis on accountability and testing, if we were to do more to enable teachers and schools to individualize educational plans for all children. But beyond that, it seems entirely plausible to me that we might envision a plan beyond the traditional schooling process that might be called an individualized life plan. For John Dewey, education shouldn’t be considered separate from life, as it is life itself. True, but nevertheless our individualized education plans offer models for thinking even bigger than we do now. Thinking through with the caring, concerted intelligence of loved ones and experts what might be possible and what goals ought to be primary and emphasized for a person’s life, not simply for their plan of schooling, could be a valuable path forward for more children with disabilities, enabling an expansive approach to exploring the meaning of the examined life.

Educate Ourselves and Others

There are debates in education about how to approach the matter of separating students with disabilities from the mainstream classroom, where necessary, versus strong efforts to include all students in regular classroom activities (Connor and Ferri 2007). There are many subtleties

worth weighing in such debates, but one lesson has been borne out in my family's experience: The more traditional students and classrooms are exposed to people like my daughter, the fewer stares she receives, the less we hear language like "retarded," and the more the public in general is aware of accessibility needs for us all, let alone our daughter. In fighting for the rights of children with disabilities, parents and children with disabilities thereby also end up educating others a great deal and often about how some people's lives are different from those of traditionally healthy people.

I mentioned already the passing remarks about how our 12-year-old must be such a big help around the house. Each parent and child with disabilities must decide for himself or herself what amount of education he or she is willing to engage in with others. At the same time, when we open up to others, it is important to remember that we might end up learning remarkable things from their points of view. The doctors who helped me to see that my daughter could make choices early on, before I had realized it, were one example. My students this past semester in the Philosophy of Education course are another example. It is important to remember also that the task of having to educate others, when it is necessary, also involves a process of devising ideas and expressions that we may not have had ready to hand previously with respect to how to think about our loved ones and their lives. When I let some people know of my frustration, for example, about the inaccessibility of some areas in a parking lot for bringing my daughter with me, some people pointed out to me other places where I could park that would offer greater accessibility. Learning can go both ways. It can also be exhausting. So, it is all right to decide for oneself what one has the energy for, but where possible, working to avoid bitterness and to err on the side of the patient and open-minded education of oneself and others is an attitude we can strive for with a kind of optimism balanced by an appreciation for the limits of our energies.

At bottom, it makes a difference to be seen. People can much more easily be callous and flippant with their language and attitudes about policy and public expenditures when they do not know of people who might suffer from them. So, even if schools make use of some separating off of students with special needs, substantial efforts are needed morally and politically for ensuring that people in general are made aware of the kinds of lives and considerations that are needed for ensuring the stated American ideals of equal opportunity and justice for all.

Conclusion

The outlook and attitudes laid out in this essay are presented here as a proposal, defended with some theoretical argument and at least anecdotal evidence from an experienced parent of a child with disabilities.

At the same time, as a scholar of educational policy and philosophy, I believe that there are important ideas at least worth trying out more widely, which may prove valuable for helping new parents of children with disabilities to navigate their challenges, emotions, and distinct opportunities for rethinking how life can be meaningful. Profound suffering can be felt and inspire bitterness, divisiveness, and distance when the public has a need and potential insight to offer for how to think through our next steps in the fight for accessibility and opportunity for all. I hope that parents, children, and adults living with disabilities, as well as teachers, administrators, and educational policymakers, might benefit from at least thinking through how the ideas of stoic pragmatism can balance constant striving for progress with acceptance in the face of challenges beyond our power to overcome. I should conclude here with the recognition that my family is fortunate when it comes to educational and financial resources, compared to many people. Nevertheless, I believe that the insights here could speak usefully to anyone's pursuit of a happy life as a parent, guardian, loved one, or caregiver who works with children with disabilities. I also hold out hope that communicating with others about these difficult topics might enable administrators, policymakers, and our fellows to question their assumptions and to strive sincerely together for the best for all, including our most vulnerable children with disabilities.

Notes

- 1 The most recent example has targeted immigrants (Kim 2019), More examples arose in the developments that lead to the passage of the Affordable Care Act.
- 2 A Better Life for Children, <http://abetterlifeforchildren.com>.
- 3 A Better Life for Kids, <http://abetterlifeforkids.org>.
- 4 “[M]arriage is ‘one of the vital personal rights essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free men.’” *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. 11 (2015), https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/14-556_3204.Pdf.
- 5 I sought and received my wife's permission to talk about all of the matters raised in this essay, including especially this one.
- 6 To be sure, such a measure might be used problematically to lower expectations for talented but disadvantaged children. Then again, African American students are already pushed now into special education at a rate disproportional to their peers. See Wanda J. Blanchett (2006).
- 7 For one example of a study of a matter under studied concerning the communication that can be involved in various forms of touch, see Hertenstein et al. (2009).
- 8 This famous line comes from Plato. 1992a. *Apology*, 38a (Trans. Grube, 41).
- 9 For an overarching view of Singer's outlook, reported on in the popular press, see Nat Hentoff (1999).
- 10 The language I have in mind here concerns the groups that Rawls often referred to as the “least advantaged” in society, as in John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1999). It is well known that he was heavily inspired by Kant, but

- in a number of his works he was explicit about his intentions to find ways of reconciling the utilitarian and deontological traditions. He explicitly draws on both in his influential essay, “Two Concepts of Rules” (1955).
- 11 In *Republic*, book V, 460c, one translation includes in a footnote the qualification that “There can be no doubt that Plato is recommending infanticide by exposure for these babies, a practice which was quite common in ancient Greece as a method of birth control.” (Trans. Grube, 134).
 - 12 I am grateful to Joseph Barry, William Cadwell, Erin Hester, Samer Jan, Maddie Noffsinger, Madelaine Pope, Josh Smith, and to students who preferred not to be named.
 - 13 I have in mind here several essays from his (Lachs 1995) book, *The Relevance of Philosophy to Life* including “Active Euthanasia” (181–187).
 - 14 The line is commonly attributed to Angela Davis.
 - 15 For an example of such focus, see Michael Greenston and Adam Looney (2012).

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