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ARTICLE: WRITING KIDS OFF IS NOT AN OPTION

If you're a parent or teacher or coach or youth leader, have you ever been tempted to write a child off? To expect little or nothing and put your efforts elsewhere? For an hour or a day or even permanently? Have you ever felt justified because a child was uncooperative or disinterested or disruptive?

It can be a particular temptation when you have other children or students who need you and show more appreciation for your efforts and make more progress.

But it's also an opportunity to be one of those special people who never gives up on a child. Who never mentally throws up his hands and says, "It's his own fault, he's not even trying."

In John Elder Robison's book, "Look Me In The Eye: My Life With Asperger's," he writes about being frequently written off as a child. He makes the point that his parents and teachers and psychologists often misunderstood his intentions. For example, he said that child psychologists who said "John prefers to play by himself," got it dead wrong.

"I never wanted to be alone...I played by myself because I was a failure at playing with others. I was alone as a result of my own limitations, and being alone was one of the bitterest disappointments of my young life."

Although he became highly successful in later life as he learned to interact with people on their terms, Robison says he will always carry the pain of people routinely misunderstanding and criticizing and rejecting him when he was young.

Many children with Asperger Syndrome, autism or other neurobiological conditions have behaviors that are easy to misinterpret. Many try hard to succeed, but their brains process information differently than most other kids. Some may blurt out answers in class. Some get frustrated and have meltdowns at things that are trivial to other children.

It's not enough to tell these kids the rules, because their brains are operating from a separate set of rules that seem right to them. A child who disrupts a class (from your point of view) may be desperately trying to participate. A child who tells other children what to do, may absolutely believe he is helping them. Even a child who sometimes needs to be alone, because too much sensory stimulation can be overwhelming, may also yearn to interact with other kids.

Sometimes it takes a die-hard parent or teacher or leader to help these kids learn and relate so they can succeed in life.

I'm not talking about throwing out discipline and consequences. I'm talking about applying the rules with compassion and making accommodations while you help a child see things from a perspective that's foreign to him. About trying to find out what a child is thinking and why she acts the way she does. About seeking help if dealing with a special needs child, along with other children, becomes overwhelming.

Writing a child off is getting stuck on what we can't do with him or her. What if we always focus, instead, on what else we could try? What if we live by the approach adopted by the mission control crew in the movie "Apollo 13," when three astronauts' lives were at stake?

"Failure is not an option."