

Stepping Back – Stepping Forward

Reflections and Predictions

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In the decade of the seventies when parents recognized a child was struggling with delayed speech or attention deficit they enrolled them in Montessori, hired speech therapists and sighed in relief when physicians assured them their toddler would “outgrow” these disorders. The eighties brought problems in school with basic reading, writing, math and what would later be labeled social perception disorder. Soon these children were referred to LD classrooms or given subsidies to attend “Special Schools” designed to remediate or develop coping skills to compensate for their academic performance. Many youngsters improved and managed to “catch up,” others continued to function below the “Normal Range.” Regardless of “trendy” medications and diets, “innovative” teaching techniques and well meaning parents and professionals these youngsters remained frustrated and unable to perform like their peers. Some went off to private boarding schools offering an array of options and life skill courses, but most remained in regular high school programs. By the late eighties and early nineties they were finished with formal high school, and pursuing employment. The twenty first century brought their parents the realization that a Learning Disability is a Lifelong Disorder that would continue to affect the way their children receive, retain and express information.

The job market for these adults with hidden and sometimes obvious disabilities is not encouraging. Many have difficulty getting and keeping a job. Most people with learning disabilities fail not at their jobs but at the water fountain. It is at this point in their lives that the previously diagnosed Social Perception Disorder begins to affect job

performance. Many experience repeated job failures not because they aren't good employees but because they don't "get the picture" or "get the message." Those fortunate enough to find employment deal with variable schedules, as well as minimal wages and benefit packages, allowing them little time for social activities and limited funds for extras.

Parents of these adults with learning disabilities are keenly aware of the shortcomings for a fulfilling lifestyle. They realize these young adults are vulnerable to unscrupulous influences by television, telephone, Internet or the work place. They fall prey to credit card scams, phone sex and telemarketing fraud. Limited by marginal social skills their routine is often unsatisfying and lonely. Beyond the family, safe activities and secure relationships are minimal. Difficulties continue with organizing positive free time. Private counseling helps to fill in the gaps and maintain a semblance of normalcy. Often the identity of these adults with hidden disabilities remains sheltered by loving families who continue to do the best they can for them. As parents age they realize they are less able to effectively influence and assist their children who remain stagnant in their skills, job advancement and social life. During their school years their children struggled with peer relationships. As adults, they become even more detached and removed. Their level of maturity does not match their age. Their siblings and childhood friends continue in the usual life tracks of expanding careers, marriage and parenting heightening awareness that once again they are not **INSTEP** with the norm, often unhappy marching to their undefined drumbeat.

Parents often feel they are alone as they confront these peculiar patterns. They respond with relief when they discover another family who admits their son or daughter

is a social recluse or has fallen prey to people of questionable character and motives. Small clusters of parents who have maintained a support system through three decades now look at the future. Acknowledging that the next two decades will leave their offspring without them as a safety net, they recognize the need to proceed with proper estate planning and continued counseling. They also recognize their social activities will diminish considerably without family involvement. Their willingness to work together with social workers to establish a not for profit support organization for learning disabled adults has resulted in the first of its kind---**Step Out USA, Inc.** Based in Chicago, **Step Out** plans to work with adults with learning disabilities who need help connecting with others adults for social, cultural and recreational activities. Through this networking and sharing of life experiences, people with hidden disabilities can work to enhance their self-image, gain confidence and achieve a more fulfilling lifestyle.

Step Out USA participants will gain strength from meeting others who are struggling with the same issues. Sharing their job challenges, exploring their mutual and varied learning and coping skills will afford them an opportunity to vent their feelings and to widen their perspective. They will feel better about themselves when they are in a position to help someone else by sharing their experiences. Their self-esteem and mental health will be enhanced as they recognize they are not alone and society acknowledges and affirms their individuality.

The board of **Step Out USA** is committed to creating social activities on a monthly basis. Information will be available on the web site including a chat room, continuing education programs and employment updates. An annual fee of \$50.00 per member plus a minimal charge depending on the event or activity will enable participants

to attend all the activities sponsored by **Step Out USA, Inc.** Self-advocacy will be encouraged through meetings with others who have become avid spokespeople for learning disabilities. Activities will be suited to singles as well as married couples.

Presently the greatest challenge confronting **Step Out** is identifying the very population they seek to help. These are people who vary from high achievers to those who are still struggling. Everyone who is part of LDA has a stake in this process. Those who have been members for thirty-five years have the greatest stake because their needs are immediate. Parents with youngsters in preschool need to know what lies ahead. Hopefully the horizon will be clearer and more positive as each year passes. If you are or know a potential member, please contact **Step Out USA, Inc.** through the internet at www.stepoutusa.org or call 847-289-4480.