



## **Sorting important to from important for and finding the balance between them.**

### **Important to:**

What is important to a person includes only what people are “saying”:

- With their words or
- With their behavior. Remember that many people have lived in circumstances where they were expected to say what others wanted them to say. Where people are saying what they think we want to hear, we have to rely on “listening” to their behavior.

### **Important for:**

- What is important for people includes those things that we need to keep in mind for people regarding –
- Issues of health or safety
- What others see as important for the person to be a valued member of their community

### **The Balance:**

- The idea of the balance between what is important to and what is important for a person is rooted in the human condition where none of us has a life where we have everything that is important to us and none of us pay perfect attention to everything that is important for us. All of us strive for a balance between them. Learning what is important to and what is important for has to be done before you can help find the balance. Everyone finds that what is important to them and what is important for them are in conflict from time to time. A way to illustrate this is to ask “when you have a bad day, do you eat or drink something fattening?” The answer from many people is yes. The next question is “what would happen if you had not a bad day but a bad year? Would you become a bigger person?” Again the answer from many people is that they would gain weight. Finally ask “what if we were tracking your weight, and after it had gone up, we came to you and said that we were putting you on a 1,200 calorie diet because of the weight gain. How would you feel – better or worse? Would you follow the diet?” Most people answer that they would feel worse and not follow the diet. In this story people are using something fattening to comfort them after a bad day, day after day. The bad days are occurring because something that is important to them is not present (or things that need to be absent are occurring). Helping this person lose weight has to start with understanding why he or she is having bad days. Then after helping the person look at what can be done to decrease the bad days, you then can look at alternative ways for the person to comfort him or herself. What works for us and for those that we plan with is to look at both and then try to account for what is important for using what is important to people as the context.
- Recognizing important to and important for is the fundamental person-centered thinking skill. What we have seen over the years is that nearly anyone in need of long-term services, who is in circumstances where others exercise control, has what is important for them addressed while what is important to them is often largely ignored or seen as what is done when time permits. Those who are receiving services are often told that issues of health and safety should be important to them even when their behavior says it is not. Those providing the services are told that issues of health and safety are paramount and the significance of what is important to

people is lost. Any intervention or program designed to address what is important for someone without taking into account what is important to that person, is not adequate and will often fail.

- Conversely, simply saying that we support choice and paying no attention to what is important for people creates an environment where choice is used as an excuse for doing nothing and as a result people may be hurt. Every program and intervention must take both into account and strive to find a balance between them that works for the person. This skill must be applied daily in our work with people with significant disabilities; not only to address the presence of a disability, but also the absence of control many people experience in critical areas. We should all be trying to help people maximize the positive control they have over their lives. This means that you are helping people find the balance between important to and important for that works for them. A balance that accounts for issues of health and safety but recognizes that perfect health and perfect safety are rarely achieved and all of us address what is important for us in the context of what is important to us.
- Again this is a human issue, not just a disability issue. A physician who specializes in sports medicine knows that advice to an injured athlete must include alternative ways to stay fit as well as what exercise not to do. The presence of a significant disability (especially if it affects cognitive function) makes the effort more complex. But problem solving around finding the best balance requires that people first know how to consistently separate what is important to from what is important for. It also requires that they recognize what they do not know. Those who are paid are typically operating in “crisis mode” and may look for the quick fix; and teams often assume that they know things that they actually do not know.
- Completing this simple one-page exercise causes people to stop and think about what they do and do not know. Taking steps to find out and recognize the things we do not know is a critical part of helping many individuals move toward better lives. When to do it and how to do it.
- This is a fundamental skill and you want to find and use every opportunity to apply it. It involves asking **three outwardly simple questions. (What is important to a person? What is important for a person? And what else do we need to learn?)**
- Having people stop and think about the answers helps them determine whether they are taking both what is important to and what is important for into account and whether or not there are significant things that still need to be learned. People think they can do it as soon as they hear it, but we have found that they need practice and feedback.
- To see if it is part of the culture of a given place, listen to the conversations. Do those who provide support use these or similar terms in their conversations? Are they describing something as important to or important for? Ask people if they think something is important to or important for? Do they have a sense for the difference between the two? Listen to see if those providing the support know when they do not have enough information, or the right information, or where there is something that still needs to be learned. Where people are struggling, have it wrong, or just need to stop and think for a moment, fill in the chart with what you do know. If this tool is new to people, it often works best if you do not ask the questions directly, but rather fill it out yourself as you listen to people talk. Then based on what you heard, show people what you have done and engage them in a discussion. If it is not new to them, have everyone participate completing it. Where people appear to be confused and have placed something under a different heading than you would have, ask guiding questions rather than telling people that they were wrong. It also works better to do it quickly (taking 5 minutes or so

when it is not a crisis) and do it often. Do not spend too much time or people may see it as taking time away from other things that need to happen. Do it frequently enough so that it will become a positive habit, but only when it will be seen as useful. Try to help people see that a brief pause to think about what we know (and don't know) is often helpful in figuring out how to support people.