# A close-up of a logo Description automatically generatedA green and white logo Description automatically generatedThe Independent Living Advocate’s Toolkit for Mentoring Families of Children with Disabilities

## Brief #7: Maximizing Abilities Without Over- or Under-Estimating Them

Parenting styles are written and talked about a great deal these days. Such terms as helicopter parent – one who is always hovering around, bulldozer parent – one who moves all obstacles out of the child’s way, and eggshell parent – one who is so unpredictable it causes the child to walk on eggshells – are some that are familiar to many families. When disability is added into the mix, fear and anxiety about “getting it right” can escalate and intensify any behaviors.

When a child has a disability, families have a natural tendency to go in one of two ways with their assumptions about abilities. Some families will overestimate their child’s abilities and teach the philosophy that “you can do anything you want to do.” “That blind person climbed Mt. Everest, so why can’t you?” Some families will underestimate and block their child from participating in activities or contributing to the family life because they assume the child is incapable. “You don’t understand these things, so we will make the decision.” Or “It’s safer to stay home.”

Professional guidance, testing, and needs assessments may provide baseline information that aids families in choosing age-appropriate and ability-appropriate activities for the developing child. However, talents and abilities don’t always become apparent through testing and evaluation. Centers for Independent Living assist consumers with doing self-assessments, but that process may not be complete or useful if the individual is new to the idea of directing their own life and goals. It’s important to remind families of children with disabilities that the children have the right to grow into the version of themselves that they want to be, and that means allowing them to experiment, try and fail, and learn lessons sometimes the hard way. Actual participation in a wide range of activities, school subjects, and social events provides fertile ground for self-discovery. Self-discovery doesn’t have to disregard safety and security to be successful and that topic will be discussed in a subsequent Brief.

As children participate and try different things, the family can observe and make note of how things are going. If it didn’t work out so well, encouragement to try again may be appropriate. If there’s a disability-related barrier, brainstorming about adaptations or accommodations can open possibilities. Checking in with a peer mentor who has a similar disability and has tried similar activities can be especially helpful to the young person and informative to the family. If they found the activity boring, that piece of information could help identify something else that would be more interesting.

Parents don’t have to constantly hover, remove all obstacles, or stay anxious about the future of a child with a disability. Also, it doesn’t work to ignore the disability and pretend a child can do everything nor does it work to imprison them to keep them safe. There’s a balance between acknowledging that the child has differences in how they learn or perform and believing that they have many capabilities that can be uncovered through exploration. Trying and failing or trying and succeeding both teach the value of persistence, practice, and self-trust.