

Long ago, in a simpler time – a time when Dolly the Cloned Sheep emerged into the world and the Macarena was the dance on everyone’s hands, heads, and hips – sportswear uber-brand Nike launched an off-key TV ad: “You Don’t Win Silver, You Lose Gold.” The point being that the only person ever to be celebrated is the one who defeats all the others. And all the others can just go scratch. It was a very Nike-y mantra (with all due respect to the swoosh), built on a foundation of sweat and hubris and unforgiving expectation. But, while meant to encourage athletes, to push them harder to push themselves harder, the message landed very differently with the Average Joe. Because instead of inspiring others to try their best, it shamed those who ended short of first, taunted those who deigned to even attempt it. It made a mockery of the process and a threat of the dream. Nike’s marketing missed the point entirely; no one ever loses anything, we win simply by having shown up.

This lesson resonates even more in the IDD community. It is tempting to succumb to worry with our children in general, but especially when they have a disability or difference. We want to keep them secure and shield them from harm, both physical and emotional, shielding them with whatever resources we have on hand. But even bubble wrap breaks and what remains within is softer and weaker and more fragile than before we entombed it in plastic. Ironic, we know: like damaging skin produces protective calluses, getting knocked around a little by life builds resilience. And that is what, ultimately, makes us stronger.

There’s a philosophy in these parts called “The Dignity of Risk,” which highlights all there is to gain just by allowing ourselves – and our children – to show up. The term was introduced by Robert Perske in 1972 and features these key principles:

1. **Autonomy and Choice:** Individuals have the right to make their own decisions, even if those choices carry potential dangers. This includes

the ability to refuse certain types of care or engage in activities that may pose risks.

2. **Balancing Risk and Safety:** Care providers must find a balance between ensuring safety and respecting an individual's right to take reasonable risks. This involves supporting individuals in understanding the risks associated with their choices and helping them make informed decisions.
3. **Supported Decision-Making:** It is essential to assist individuals in analyzing potential risks and benefits associated with their decisions. This includes discussing options with them and involving their families or support networks in the decision-making process.
4. **Empowerment:** The dignity of risk promotes empowerment by encouraging individuals to take control of their lives and make choices that reflect their values and preferences. This approach fosters independence and enhances overall well-being.

And there is so much to gain by it. We build our Confidence Muscle, we strengthen our resilience. We relish feelings of hope and visions of crossing proverbial finish lines, the roar of the adoring crowd clattering in our brain. We don the robes of our own best friend when things don't go our way. We learn to lick our wounds with a mighty swipe. Because there is an inherent dignity in *doing* things, whether on the slopes at the Milan-Cortina winter games or in our own backyard, taking our unique long jumps despite the threat of falling short, and laying ourselves bare in the pursuit of accomplishment.

Billion-dollar sneaker titan or not, we all need to reframe what it means to compete, whether against others or our diagnoses or the persistent, insistent voices in our heads that tell us, "You shouldn't, you can't, you won't." Because

there's always someone who finishes last in every Olympic event, but they all get to call themselves Olympians. We all deserve the same.