

The dignity of risk is the idea that self-determination and the right to take reasonable risks are essential to dignity and self-esteem and so should not be impeded by excessively cautious caregivers concerned about their duty of care. Acclaimed disability advocate Robert Perske once stated,

“Overprotection...can smother people emotionally, squeeze the life out of their hopes and expectations, and strip them of their dignity. Overprotection can keep people from becoming all they can become. Many of our best achievements came the hard way: We took risks, fell flat, suffered, picked ourselves up, and tried again. Sometimes we made it and sometimes we did not. Even so, we were given the chance to try. Persons with special needs need these chances, too.”

## DIGNITY OF RISK VS. DUTY OF CARE



### HOW DO WE EMPOWER PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES?

The question then becomes, how do we empower the persons for whom we have a duty of care?

- Firstly, we need to ensure that they have full knowledge of their rights, choices, and opportunities, including a balanced explanation of risks, benefits, and consequences of particular choices.
- Secondly, we need to encourage development of communication skills and their ability to make and maintain relationships within strong and diverse social networks.
- Finally, we need to encourage a strong sense of personal identity and self-worth by supporting choices, lifestyle, preferences, and passions.

Independence, community participation and valued status are the pathways to personal empowerment and personal empowerment is the key to personal safety. **Thus, the dignity of risk is our duty of care.**

Duty of care is the responsibility of organizations (and the people who work within them) including guardians, caregivers, social workers, medical professionals, and others to ensure they do no harm to the persons they support. However, this does not mean that they must *protect the person from themselves*.

Many caregivers struggle with balancing their duty of care with dignity of risk. These two concepts are often seen as ideas in competition with each other.

However, when one considers the dignity of risk to be a fundamental principle or practice in the duty of care, these two concepts begin to work well together. That is to say that, by empowering persons with disabilities to take risks in exercising choice and control, caregivers and support persons are making them safer by the very act of empowerment. This is because the primary consideration in safeguarding an individual is the reduction of that person's vulnerability by empowering them to *safeguard themselves*.