

## INTRODUCTION

Hi and welcome to the Cerebral Palsy Foundation's ParentWise Podcast series. I'm Robyn Cummins.

Marelle Thornton AM is President of The Spastic Centre of New South Wales and the mother of an adult daughter with cerebral palsy.

Marelle understands what it means to deal with the complexities of disability on a daily basis. On some days, as parents, we might feel hopeful for the future. On other days we may be overwhelmed, wondering if we're ever going to see our way clear of appointments and reports and funding applications and therapy sessions.

In this podcast, Marelle shares a thinking tool called 'The Six Hats,' which she has found invaluable for dealing with life as a parent of a child with a disability. Devised by Dr Edward de Bono, and discussed at length in his book, 'Six Thinking Hats', the tool gives us six different ways to think about thinking and, in this case, to think about disability.

It's a tool that can help parents change their perspective on any situation and find a clear path forward for the future.

## THE PATH FORWARD: 'THINKING' AND 'HATS'

My own experience as a parent tells me that we all can benefit from mutually sharing our journey and as a result, we can bring to each other some renewed hope, new strategies, enriched thinking and hopefully, some solutions in navigating our way around any obstacles or clearing those hurdles that we, as parents and carers of children with disabilities might feel are frustrating or barring that all important 'path forward'.

Information sharing is a vital ingredient in setting direction for our lives, for adding new insights to our decision-making, and for confirming that we, as parents in partnership with professionals, are on the right track - 'the path forward'.

I am the mother of an adult daughter with cerebral palsy. Like you, I too, deal daily with the complexities of loving and living in a special life context.

As President of The Spastic Centre of New South Wales, I deal with the complexities of corporate governance, organisational policy and the service performance of an organisation which operates to support, empower and advocate on behalf of people with cerebral palsy and their families.

Each of these contexts, parent and president, requires a great deal of thinking, and often requires me to hastily remove one hat and stand and think under another. We all do this in some way in our lives.

What I want to share with you today has two key components – the first of which is 'thinking' and the second, 'hats'.

As parents of children with disabilities, we are no different to any other parent – we simply want the very best for our children as well as needing to satisfy ourselves that we have done everything possible to achieve that 'very best'.

Often though, the pathway to that end can seem to be a frustrating and emotion-charged maze; or series of obstacles and detours, sometimes lonely, often bumpy. Sometimes, even the very thought of starting, let alone achieving a next step, seems altogether too daunting for us.

We are forced to do a whole lot of thinking, both with our heads and with our hearts, and each step we contemplate, demands that we make decisions – decisions which for the most part, weigh very heavily upon us.

- *Which school?*
- *Which therapy program?*
- *What options are available for financial support, emotional support, help in the home?*
- *How much is this wheelchair or that keyboard modification going to cost?*
- *How can I get a break?*

For parents of children with special needs, thinking can often be clouded and confused, fraught with emotion, even painful sometimes. So what we need to do is learn to think better.

Thinking skills expert, Dr Edward de Bono believes that what most people do in their lives, is think in a random pattern of 'drift, waffle and reaction'. According to de Bono, thinking is our most important skill, the ultimate human resource. He goes on to say that we can all become more effective as decision-makers and problem-solvers by focusing our thinking and thinking more comprehensively and more creatively.

But what has all this to do with finding the path forward as parents of children with disability? Well I believe – a lot! And here's where the hats come in!

Too often when trying to make headway to that 'very best' for our children, for ourselves and our families, we steep our thinking in emotion, in concerns, worries or fear about the future. In doing so, we often unconsciously block our capacity to be strategic, to be in control, to be productive and therefore, ultimately effective.

Without really knowing it, we can sometimes make our own hurdles and obstacles. As Dr de Bono theorises, we can easily run the risk of what he calls, drifting, waffling and reacting.

So, he has separated thinking into six distinct modes, identified by six coloured 'thinking hats'.

He believes that if we can discipline ourselves to 'put on' a particular hat, our thinking can be focused. By 'switching' hats, we can change or redirect thinking.

The outcome, he says, ensures that our discussions, deliberations, planning and actions are better focused and more productive.

So what are these hats?

Thinking under the **WHITE HAT**, we should deal with only plain facts, figures, data and information. Wearing the white hat allows information to be presented in a neutral, non-threatening and objective way. It allows us to look at and ultimately find out, what information is available, what information is needed, and how it might be obtained.

Opinions, emotions, beliefs and arguments are put aside. Wearing the white hat, only facts are considered. Of these facts, you might be asking yourself questions like:

- *What information do I have?*
- *What information is missing?*
- *What further information would I like to have?*
- *How am I going to get all this information?*

And these questions call for and usually achieve clear, objective answers.

Thinking under the **RED HAT**, allows for feelings, emotions and intuition to be expressed and to be expressed without having to justify them, without having to explain or apologise for them.

You can simply say what you feel and allow these thoughts into any discussion or planning without having to pretend that they are anything else other than just the way you feel.

- *I'm so scared of what the future may hold.*
- *I really can't cope on my own anymore.*
- *I am so angry that this has happened to my child, to my family, to me.*
- *I simply don't like that teacher's attitude to my child.*

It is always valuable to get feelings out into the open. And it is OK to do so and to feel the way you do. It's OK to be angry or hurt or teary. The Red Hat decrees it! (I like the RED HAT!) Thinking under the red hat allows for getting things off our chests and for simply and honestly letting go or blowing off steam.

But it is not the hat to wear for long periods at a time, nor is it the hat that should dictate action. It should always be worn in conjunction with other hats, otherwise clarity, purpose and decisiveness may be impossible.

De Bono's **BLACK HAT**, is the hat of 'caution' and 'judgment'. Thinking under the black hat, allows us to consider proposals or plans critically and logically, to reflect on why a suggestion does not fit the facts you have, or is not within your experience, or has no fit with your lifestyle or way of operating.

When wearing a black hat, you may be making comments or judgments along the lines of:

- *This piece of equipment is beyond our means.*
- *I don't think this particular school can cater for my child's special needs.*
- *I simply can't afford the time away from work to attend all these meetings.*
- *It's just not practical for me to do his therapy at home.*
- *I don't understand how that can work.*

The black hat is valuable, the most used, and possibly the most useful hat. However, it should not be overused, as it can kill creative thinking and deny many other possibilities and options.

And don't jump to the black hat too early in problem-solving – it can just snuff out new possibilities, simply by introducing negativity too early.

The **YELLOW HAT** is for optimism, logical positive views and looking for benefits, feasibility and how something can be achieved.

Wearing the yellow hat you might consider posing and answering questions such as:

- What are the benefits of this option?
- Why is this method or that piece of equipment preferable?
- How can we make this really work?

The Yellow hat is the deliberate search for positives. I like this one too! I call it the 'Pollyanna' hat.

Dr de Bono's **GREEN HAT** is specifically concerned with new ideas, new ways of looking at things. It is the hat for considering additional alternatives, new and interesting approaches and achieving creative solutions.

With green hat thinking, you might ask:

- *Could we do this in a different way?*
- *Might there be another explanation?*
- *Are there any other ideas here that we could explore?*

Often green hat thinking is difficult, because it goes against our habits of judgement, criticism and sometimes, that all too ready resignation.

But it is amazing what can happen when you think outside that proverbial 'square'.

And last, but not least, is the **BLUE HAT**, the hat of thinking about thinking, and thinking about controlling and guiding thinking and actions.

- *What have I thought about so far?*
- *This is what I need to think about next.*
- *This is what I have to do next.*

These then are the six different types of thinking that can help guard against that drift, that waffle and reaction.

Knowingly or unconsciously, we all engage in many of these different forms of thinking at some stage or another. What we must do though, is try to discipline ourselves to be ever-mindful of the types of thinking of which we are all capable, and then choose to use them all.

When we are seeking a path forward with a problem or issue, it can be really helpful to acknowledge that you can separate thinking and so very consciously, attempt to think under this hat or that.

Be prepared to verbalise the separation by telling yourself and others how you're thinking, not just what you're thinking. Whether you're dealing with an emotion, a critical choice or even something that's a fait accompli that mightn't sit too comfortably, be prepared to think about it using a variety of approaches - a variety of coloured hats.

A path forward can only be achieved when we make decisions and take actions that are informed and guided by the results of thinking strategically and on a number of planes. It is a combination of the different types of thinking that can give greater purpose, greater focus and confidence in moving forward.

But a word of caution – don't get stuck on the easiest thinking types – if you let any one hat fit too comfortably or for too long, you'll deny yourself the satisfaction and comfort of knowing that you have done everything possible.

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At the beginning of this message, I said that the path forward is about seeking out the best for your child, for you, and your family.

I am hoping that my message will be of help to you at some time.

You know, one of the greatest gifts that we, as parents of kids with disabilities can offer, is the gift of loving, thoughtful and rational decision making on their behalf.

## CLOSE

Thanks for listening. We hope you've found these strategies and ideas useful.

You can download or listen to more episodes in the ParentWise Podcast series at the Cerebral Palsy Foundation's website - [www.cpfoundation.com.au](http://www.cpfoundation.com.au)