

“This isn't everyday learning – but it's just as important...”

We can all benefit from doing more to welcome those with disabilities, both children and adults, into our early years settings, says **Tim Kahn**...

When our daughter, Sarah, was very young, we used to visit our friend Micheline, who uses a wheelchair. Her daughter, Lucy, could not walk (as a result of the same impairment as her mother) and Sarah used to – intuitively – get down on her hands and knees and crawl around with Lucy. Fast forward a few years to when they were both in their respective primary schools; when we visited Micheline, a special treat for Sarah was to stand on the platform at the back of Lucy's electric wheelchair as the two of them whizzed to the local shops.

Micheline is a committed fighter for inclusion, which not only meant that Lucy got to stay in mainstream education right until school-leaving age (rather than going to a special school – mainstream education for disabled children was still radical in the 1980s when Lucy was growing up) but also that all of her friends lived in the local community. In fact, Lucy and her friends used to gather in Micheline's flat, both because it was the only accessible home and also because Micheline was there every day and thus able to supply the youngsters with nibbles, drinks and a listening ear. Those particular young people, and their parents, learned that not only were disabled people part of their community, but that they had a lot to give.

This is not the everyday learning that children pick up at their educational setting; it's not on the curriculum – but what Sarah learned

from being friends with Lucy was the profound lesson that while we may be different in our abilities or appearance, we are the same underneath in that we are all human. Not literacy or numeracy, but certainly as important, if not more so.

The fight for inclusion

Disabled people led the fight for their rights and inclusion in all aspects of society; their fight was informed by 'the social model of disability', which understands disabled people's exclusion from everyday society as a result of society's attitudes and behaviour rather than of their own impairments (as the 'medical model of disability' claims). This fight ultimately led to rights for disabled people enshrined in legislation from the mid-1990s, including the groundbreaking UN

Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

It was a small number of parents of disabled children, following in disabled people's footsteps, who fought for the inclusion of their children throughout all sectors of mainstream provision rather than having them educated separately.

Although much progress has been made, the battle between mainstream schools for all or special schools for disabled children still rages. It remains, in many cases, a struggle for parents to get the education they want for their child, despite the growing number of services that exist to support them: for example, each local area has a legal duty to provide a parent partnership service that offers parents of disabled children the information they need. There is





about the author

Tim Kahn has worked with parents and families for some 20 years, including eight years spent working at the Pre-school Learning Alliance's national centre.

also a National Network of Parent Carer Forums, which gives a voice to these parents in matters pertaining to the educational provision their children can access.

There are still parents who find it difficult to adjust to having one or more disabled children. Although great advances have been made towards equality for disabled people, one can still say that many old-fashioned 'medical model' attitudes continue to exist, and many non-disabled people do not count disabled people among their friends. It is these kinds of attitudes and realities that can sometimes make it hard for parents of disabled children to fully accept and welcome them into the world.

Supporting and learning

Anybody committed to supporting the cause of educational inclusion will have an interest in helping parents who find themselves in the situations described above, by ensuring they have access to the early years settings and schools they feel are appropriate for their children's development. But how many of us recognise the huge value to able-bodied children of spending time with those with disabilities, as illustrated by Sarah's experiences with Lucy?

Val Railton is the inclusion coordinator for KIDS in Wakefield in Yorkshire; she works with the early years and out of school services, and has been involved in the inclusion field for over 20 years. "Most workers are committed to inclusion because they see it as the right of the disabled child," she says. "However, what they do not always see is that non-disabled children benefit hugely from mixing with, rather than being separated from, disabled children. I am in contact with someone who used to attend a local setting when she was a child. She is now the parent of a disabled child and she says that she wished there had been at least one disabled child in her own childhood. If she had experienced disability in her growing-up environment, that would have given her a different and informed viewpoint as a parent to start from.

"I always say to early years workers that they never know which non-disabled child will themselves become a parent of a disabled child - it's just that statistically one of them will (whether we are prepared to face the fact or not)," she adds.

Val goes on to talk about the importance of the normalisation of disability into young children's lives. "In the same way that we brought parents from minority ethnic and different religious communities into settings to share their cultures and religious practices, we need to find a 'normal' way of bringing disabled adults into settings so that disabled children get models of the kinds of people they might become and non-disabled children see disabled adults as 'nothing special,'" she explains. As an example, Val talks about one holiday scheme that is run locally: "A 15-year-old boy with learning difficulties attends; the young children, who also attend, probably do not

think of him as any different from the other (non-disabled) teenagers who are around them, but they learn unconsciously from their exposure to someone with a learning disability."

Val talks about other possibilities for 'normalising' contact with disabled children and adults. "We've had disabled parents who have brought their children to nursery, so children get to accept that that's what, for example, little Johnny's mum is like. She is in a wheelchair and she still brings him to nursery. It's about using situations naturally."

Of course, it's important to remember to stock your settings with resources, such as books and other toys, that portray disabled people in a positive light, too - but as Val's comments show, we can go a lot further than this positive first step.

Final thoughts

It seems as if our understanding of the inclusion of disabled people (and, in our case, disabled young children) has generally been that we are doing it for *their* benefit - and, of course, we are. But how about looking at it from the point of view that it is for the benefit of *all* of us, both disabled and not? Then we might start organising things rather differently.



find out more

- Take a look at the website howwasschool.org.uk for the views of disabled people on their childhoods and education.
- Read *Dear Parents* by Micheline Mason, herself a disabled activist. It's a book aimed particularly at non-disabled parents (and others caring for disabled children) about the issues to face when there is a disabled child in the family - written from a former disabled child's point of view, it costs £9.95 plus p&p, and you can get it from inclusive-solutions.com/bookdetails.asp?ID=299
- See the UN Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities (un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml) and especially Article 24 on education.
- Parents for Inclusion (www.parentsforinclusion.org) offer support for parents and training for early years workers (and others).