

Sample letter to a child's classmates and their families

By the Wood-Lewis family, Burlington, VT

September 12, 2006

Dear parents of children in Ms. Leon's class,

We are Benjamin's parents, Michael and Valerie. We'd like to share with you a little bit about Ben with the hope that you'll feel comfortable interacting with him and supporting your children to do the same. Some of you have already had a chance to meet Ben and to see the wonderful spirit in his eyes and hear his happy laughter.

Our son Ben will be seven this weekend and is in Ms. Leon's class with your child. He has severe cerebral palsy and a hearing problem. He is nonverbal, uses a wheelchair, and has a feeding tube in his abdomen.

Cerebral palsy (CP) results from a brain injury around the time of birth affecting the part of the brain that controls all muscles. CP does not affect thinking. Auditory dys-synchrony (his hearing diagnosis) means that Ben hears, but his understanding of spoken language may be limited. We subscribe to the notion of "total communication" for him, which means we try to speak, sign, show symbols and pictures, use gestures and facial expressions... any means to get a point across. So please talk to him as you would other seven-year-olds... just add a little gusto!

That's the medical stuff. Now if you've been hearing about Ben, you might also know that he is funny, loves to laugh and play, pays close attention to stories and games, tries terribly hard when given a chance to participate in activities... Ben is so much more than his physical deficits. He's a wonderful big brother to Madeline, Henry and Isaac; a good friend to his peers at Champlain and in our neighborhood; an active participant in horseback riding, swimming, and skiing; an avid enjoyer of books and movies; a well-loved son, cousin, nephew, and grandson.

Ben is not fragile. He can and wants to play with the other kids. If your child asks Ben first, and gets a smile in response, he/she can push Ben's chair so that Ben is in the action. Ben makes choices using his eyes. Other adults in the classroom can help your child know how to include Ben fully – please tell your child not to hesitate to ask questions.

We're eager to talk about any of this, answer questions, etc. We frequently hear that kids ask their parents and teachers about Ben and that sometimes those adults don't know how to respond. We would love to help. Also, the Champlain library, Fletcher Free and our family all have books to borrow for kids about CP and sign language.

We are so excited about Ben starting first grade! We hope this letter opens the door for you to get to know Ben and to encourage your child to do so too. Thank you!

Warmly,

Valerie and Michael Wood-Lewis