

Education Issues for Parents of Students with Developmental Disabilities

Dear Teeter Toddler Parents,

I apologize in advance for the length of this letter; I have so much to say and it's directly from my heart and a reflection of the incredible change in values that I've experienced this year.

As many of you know, I have become involved with many aspects of the Department of Education and UNH's Institute on Disabilities over the past year. I have been appointed by the Governor to serve on the Interagency Coordinating Council (ICC), a federally mandated body that advises the Health and Human Services department of the state including the Department of Ed. I've graduated from the UNH/IOD's Leadership Series and participated in two of their Autism Summer Institutes. I have traveled to California to take part in leadership training with the incredible Gamaliel Foundation.

What started out as trying to figure out how to "cure" my kid's autism has been a journey that has changed my value system and made me a much richer and more fulfilled parent and person. My search to "cure" my children has ended. I've realized that just like all parents, my job is to help give them strength to advocate for themselves as the beautiful, gifted and interesting kids that they are.

Cathy Brien is a woman with Cerebral Palsy I met last year at a conference. She spoke to me in the hallway before the event and I didn't understand her.

I smiled, moved on to find my seat and waited for the speaker to start. It turns out that she was the speaker. Her first sentence was "If you don't understand me, give me the respect of asking me to repeat myself, because I may have something to say that you'd like to hear". Then she went on to tell us how many people with disabilities are currently institutionalized and living in

conditions that are similar to and often worse than prison - secluded, ignored, mistreated, and often tortured in the name of therapy. I felt incredible shame. It was and still is overwhelming.

A hard lesson for me to learn was to realize how incredibly ignorant I was to the struggle of our fellow citizens with disabilities. I realize that my generation was served poorly by segregated schools where the children with disabilities were kept in the back room and forced to stay away from the rest of the students. That is changing and I am going to do all that is possible to help push for inclusion for all citizens within our communities.

The first step toward that goal is to ensure that the next generation's experience is different from the classroom environment that my generation had at Conval. I want this not for the benefit of my own children but so that your children will never feel as ashamed as I did when I met Cathy. I wanted to take a minute to share with you some of what I've learned about inclusive education (traditional classrooms where children with special needs are included) and hopefully dispel some myths and fears. Although the benefits to children with special needs is obvious when done well, inclusive education benefits ALL kids.

Traditionally developing children benefit by...

- Developing meaningful, warm and caring friendships
- Gaining an increased appreciation of acceptance and individual differences and diversity
- Learning greater respect for all
- Being better prepared for adult life in a truly diverse social setting
- Having a greater ability to focus

on subject matter

- Developing increased moral and ethical principles
- Most importantly, learning that each child is valued which increases their own self esteem.
- Teachers learning techniques to help all children and come up with new and interesting ways to present curriculum.
- Studies also show that all students achieve greater academic outcomes.

Many parents worry that educators will be forced to "dumb down" a curriculum. A good inclusive program will never dumb down a curriculum, in fact it's just the opposite. Instead good teachers and encouraging parents will expand the curriculum and make it richer for all students. Often they will use project based curriculum, just like Sue has always done in her multi-age classroom and like we do in our homes. Children with special needs don't have to perform at grade level or act like other kids to benefit from inclusion.

I often use an example of a project we worked on at home. Clara wanted to make a Solar system model made of paper mache. We started, then Charlie jumped in and counted the moons. Mary started playing with the fantastically slimy paper strips, and we taught her how to apply them to the planets. Clara talked on and on about the gas giants, sulfuric acid storms on Venus and gravity. They were all participating and learning together. It may seem that Clara wasn't learning because she had so much knowledge already, but Clara was teaching the other children, learning skills she needs.

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She learned how to slow down a bit, so the younger kids could be involved; she learned to be patient and to truly share her knowledge. At the same time, she had to display a mastery of her knowledge which helps improve her self esteem.

Inclusion reflects real life. Not all of our colleagues at work share the same talents, but all contribute in their own way. We often have to train new employees and occasionally have to be trained. We have multi-generations in our jobs and I can only imagine that if I had a more diverse classroom, I might understand the value system of Generation "Y" better.

Clara's abilities are advanced and as her talents started to present themselves, I started dreaming of Harvard, like many parents of gifted kids. Flashcards, study books... keeping up with the valedictorian attitude was completely changed when I met an amazing young woman from California this summer. She is 17 years old, a first generation Mexican-American and she's getting a free ride to Stanford. Her grades are good, she's involved in student government, but the key to her scholarship was her leadership role within her community. She has been working hard to get a toxic waste dump cleaned up in Oxnard, California. I attended an action where she pulled together 2,000 people and was able to pin down the head of the EPA and the Mayor of Oxnard on a number of demands. It was truly inspiring! I realized then that success doesn't just come from books and varsity sports, but from heart, good values and self esteem.

So when Bennington's elementary school allowed us the opportunity to send Clara to Hancock elementary school next year because of their fail-

ing test scores, we declined. Honestly, it was tempting because of the friendships Clara developed at Teeter Toddler with Hannah, Morgan, Grace and others, but we felt it important to keep Clara in Bennington so that she could benefit from community and from experiencing a classroom with a diverse group of skills. We expect that she'll spend time helping her peers learn some reading skills in ways that perhaps the teachers may not be able to see. We all see the world differently and children are indeed the best teachers. If Clara can use her skills to teach other kids, we know those are skills she'll master and retain for life, not just for the test. It will encourage her curiosity and increase her self-esteem.



At the same time, many kids that struggle in reading have talents for math and sports that Clara may lack and they will gain by teaching her.

In Sue's classroom, Charlie will likely be teaching other children to count to 100 by twos next year and how to shape spaghetti into the shapes of letters or trapezoids, and the other children are going to teach him about friendship and social norms in ways only other kids can. He's already well beyond where Clara was when she started at Sue's and we have every expectation for his success. Just like Clara, Charlie learns peripherally, he doesn't need to be sitting at the table to be involved in a project. If he needs to step back from the group, play with blocks or his letters, I'm sure he's still

taking in the lesson just as Clara did. Autism is a difference in perception, not a lack in intelligence or humanity. Most children with autism are caring and empathetic, feel deeply, and are incredibly intelligent.

Imagine our world without Michelangelo, Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, William Butler Yeats, Vincent Van Gogh, Andy Warhol, Hans Christian Anderson, Herman Melville, or Ludwig Van Beethoven. All of these and many more enormously important people are thought to have experienced autism. Einstein didn't talk until he was almost five and Mozart had very abrupt, jerky movement and language.

Autism is going to continue to be a part of all of our lives. Some of you already have family members and friends with children on the autism spectrum. If not, chances are it will happen soon. One out of every 90 boys is being diagnosed and one out of every 150 children overall. Your children are going to be in classes with other kids with autism; Rebecca and Will will be in many of Mary's classes starting in middle school. I am so relieved that they are going to be there to help her and in turn that their education will be enriched by inclusion.

I would love to have a night where we can get together and share our mutual concerns. I'm not naive enough to believe that there aren't any parents that feel a bit uneasy about what it means to have a kid with special needs in the classroom. After all, many of us were denied the experience of growing up with true diversity. I'm happy to host a get-together anytime.

Thank you for your support.

Yours truly,

Linda Quintanilha