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Abstract

A parent briefly describes her family's continuing struggle to allow her daughter Claire, who has a disability, to have the same educational opportunities as other children. They have managed to secure only 2 days a week in a regular school. "...if more children like Claire are allowed to attend their local schools, the sound relationships they form will doubtless continue into adulthood...perhaps one day we will find people are no longer embarrassed by disablement". **Keywords: Education, School age, Integration**

CLAIRE COMES TO SCHOOL

Claire Dolan is profoundly handicapped. Her parents tell of their continuing struggle to allow Claire to have the same educational chances as other children.

It's amazing how frequently the word "never" creeps into people's vocabulary once your child has been diagnosed as having a disability. Professional people particularly seem anxious to use it, usually coupled with the word "afraid".

"I'm AFRAID your daughter will NEVER become completely independent," they say, or

"I'm AFRAID your daughter will NEVER be able to speak like other children," and

"I'm AFRAID your daughter will NEVER be able to attend normal school."

Our daughter Claire is nearly eight years old now. The experts say she has Rett's syndrome and that she is profoundly physically and mentally handicapped. Tom and I say she is like any other child but needs support to be able to do the things that other children simply take for granted.

When she was two, Claire attended Charnwood Nursery School. This is an integrated nursery where toddlers, as well as those who cannot toddle, learn together.

It was a good time for her - a good time for all of us in fact - when she shared the ups and downs of everyday life with her young friends. She had choice and she had opportunity, just the same as everyone else. But at five years old, all that changed.

It was then that the next milestone (or rather, millstone) arrived. Mums were busy sewing names into their children's pump bags.

"You're a big boy now", they were saying, "and you'll soon be going to big school."

Some children were excited, some apprehensive, but they would all be going together. But not Claire. She was to tread a different path in a different direction and without the other children.

So, we polished up our wheelchair and toured the somewhat limited options. They were all very

nice, caring institutions, but all so very different from normality.

Where was the busy-ness of children involving themselves in productive activity? Where was the noise of little feet running here and there? Where was the constant chatter of little voices? And where were Claire's friends?

No matter how you look at it, disablement all thrust into one place is an awesome sight and I'll not forget the feelings it gave Claire and I as we did the rounds.

Claire now attends a special school where the education authority tell us her needs will best be met - where few of the other children can speak to her, where most of the other children are not in a position to help her and where she travels by

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minibus with seven other disabled children miles from where she lives and miles from the other children in her neighbourhood.

The head of our local primary school has agreed that Claire can attend on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons for lunch. I go with her. Never mind the pump bag, we got great delight from donning the school uniform like all the rest and feeling included again.

Claire joins in EVERYTHING with help from the others in the classroom and I offer assistance.

During the course of the afternoon, Claire is pushed, kissed, patted and stroked, given "wheelies" in the playground. The children stop

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and talk to her, not OVER her to me, like so many less understanding adults.

Generally, children have been far more accepting of Claire as a person - adults often seem to see her as Claire the problem.

Claire not only participates in the school's curriculum, she sometimes becomes a central part of it. Craft, design and technology lessons at the moment are taken up with making ramps all over the school to accommodate Claire's wheelchair.

Why do Claire's integrated afternoons work so well? There are many reasons but mainly it is because people want them to work.

Like most parents who have a child with special needs, there has often been considerable stress in our lives, not because of our daughter's disability but, more ironically, because of the special services provided to help us.

In future, if more children like Claire are allowed to attend their local mainstream schools, the sound relationships they form will doubtless continue into adulthood. Then, perhaps one day we will find that people are no longer embarrassed by disablement and that they will have insight into the plight of those who have a disability.

Three years on from Charnwood and, try as we may, Tom and I have only managed, by the good grace of the head and class teacher, to secure just two afternoons a week for Claire in her local primary school. Even then there is no official staffing support to assist Claire, only myself. But we will keep on and on and on, until the education authority allow her some normality in what is understood to be the best years of her life.