

family

A D V O C A C Y

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Abstract:

This article reports on 6 year-old David's experience in a mainstream classroom. The inclusion of a student with Down Syndrome has taught the school a great deal. David has learnt and matured through interacting with his classmates and has taught his friends acceptance, patience and the importance of focusing on the person rather than their disability.

JUST A LITTLE BOY

by Belinda Borbely

The day Sandra Gray gave birth to her fourth child she was told that something was not right. A blood test confirmed that their new son David had Down syndrome. Down syndrome is a genetic abnormality consisting of an extra 21st chromosome.

The majority of us have learning, speech, social, behavioural, and mental abnormalities in many areas of our lives as we grow. When reaching adulthood, accidents, sickness, cancers and genetic imperfections strike us when we least expect it. It's the severity of the case that decides if extra attention is needed, It then becomes an issue of nurturing and helping each other the best way we can, to cope and live out our life with dignity and happiness. Upon reading a Down syndrome Newsletter that Sandra had given to me, a mother ended her story with "it's looking at the person, not the disability, praising and appreciating every little accomplishment".

David seemed to be forever a baby and at thirteen months he began to crawl. After his second birthday he began to take his first steps and walk. This was to be a turning point in the Gray's life when they realised that David could learn to do something that required skills and processed thoughts. Of course they knew he would walk, however it gave them hope to discover what else he would be able to learn to do and deal with.

For the Gray family, the option of placing David in a special needs school was not a viable one. They could see that David needed individual attention, challenges, and most of all to be with regular boys and girls his own age. He needed to socialise, play, and be part of a system that allowed him to grow at his own pace. This system would have to allow for integration and most of all, understanding.

Every day of the Gray's life is a battle of patience. There are times when they are, exhausted and having a special needs child can push them to the limits. They are raising David in the best possible way they can, while learning and researching the effects of Down syndrome. Stephen Gray is Assistant Principal at Robertson Public School, so as well as dealing with many other children at work he has four of his own at home. Having a large family, both parents must work.

Sandra and Stephen decided to enrol their son at Robertson Primary School, The Principal, Michael Reilly is an advocate and believer in helping one another. If a bullying situation rears its ugly head, Mr Reilly nips it in the bud fast. Both racial and discriminate acts are not tolerated at the school. From my personal knowledge and the remarks from newly appointed teachers. Robertson Public School students are well behaved, have a happy disposition and are confident as individuals.

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This has proved to be a plus in David's life for the last eighteen months. His teacher of Year One, Lynda McEwan said "I have enjoyed having David in my class so much, and it's been a wonderful experience for me". Lynda has set modules for the year involving her students in many activities. David is involved in them all, just like her other students. The only difference is, David's set tasks are modified to allow patience and time for him to adapt.

When he was first introduced to a pen and paper he rejected them and then refused to participate in any activities given to him. With the help of Ann Murdoch who works at the school as a teacher's aide, David now holds a pen, can nearly write his name and can stencil quite nicely. Ann is with David for most of the day, and over the last few months can now sit back and watch him play with other children in the playground. She has an enormous responsibility and having worked with David for so long now, she communicates and understands his needs more than most. The biggest step to overcome now is toilet training, and David is showing a breakthrough. It will be any day now that he will take himself to the toilet unattended. The children are thrilled when he learns to do something new and they show him how excited and happy they are. It is a completely normal and innocent approach they have to him, and that many of us could learn from.

My favourite saying in life is "Walk in another person's shoes for just one day", Sandra finished it with, "and then add all the extra work and everything that goes along with it".

I have watched a little boy over the last year improve and grow in many ways, The teachers are thrilled with his progress and the best outcome is what he has taught the other pupils. They have learned acceptance and patience, discovering new attitudes and tolerance. His smile, laughter and giggles are infectious. They have a friend called David and they like to play with him. It doesn't get any better than that.

