

# ALL STUDENTS LEARNING TOGETHER

*Taking action on education*



**Family Advocacy** is an independent and impartial advocacy organisation that works with families across NSW to promote and defend the rights and interests of people who have developmental disability\*.

The organisation is managed and staffed by parents and allies of people with disability, who recognise the issues families face and who can assist in strengthening the advocacy of families.

\* **What is developmental disability?** This is a disability that occurs in the developmental period of a person's life (in the period from conception to adulthood) and includes: intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, autism and any other combination of physical, intellectual or sensory disability.

This booklet shares the schooling experiences of students with disability and their families across NSW; experiences in regular, mainstream classes.

It has been written with Mara Sapon-Shevin who is a Professor of Inclusive Education at Syracuse University. Mara has worked with families and professionals around the world to build school communities where everyone is welcome.

This booklet gives some ideas about what an inclusive school should be like as well as how to include all students.

Thank you to the families who have shared their stories.



For more information about any of the ideas expressed in this booklet, please contact us.



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# INTRODUCTION

Families that have a child with disability say that they are offered a great deal of advice and are asked to make lots of decisions in relation to their child. Some families report feeling confused or pressured. Sometimes they find that people question what they want for their child with disability.

Having the same expectations for a child with disability as you would for other kids ensures the person has all the ordinary experiences.

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This booklet will help you think about the part school plays in the whole life of your child. It is aimed at families who want their child to attend regular class at a mainstream school or are thinking about that option. It will help you talk about why you want your child to have the same school experiences as other children, and it will give you tips and examples to make it happen!

You can use it:

- when you choose a school
- to get ready for meetings
- to look out for good and bad examples of inclusion
- to understand the role of families and professionals
- for ideas to build a good relationship with the school
- to get tips about the part you can play to facilitate good inclusion
- to help you think ahead to life after school.

# MY DREAM FOR MY CHILD- KNOWING WHAT YOU WANT

Should children with disability have the chance to do the same things as other children, with the support they need? Should this be the same at school? Most people would say yes. However, it is not always easy to achieve.



If you are a parent of a child with disability, there are things you can do to guide the future of your child.

You will be in the best position to do this if you have a clear idea of what a good life for your child could be. Some people call this a vision or a dream for the future. Many families have used their vision for their child when they consider choices in their child's life.

Families of older children often reflect that it is easy to get caught up in the details of the day to day and to lose sight of the big picture.

Having a vision for the future clear in your mind can be a useful thing if you are in a position where you are explaining your decisions to someone else or perhaps rejecting an option. It can help people understand your thinking and make it easier to decide if something moves you towards or away from your vision for your child.

Lots of families have used their vision to help a school understand what they want and what they mean by inclusion.

I found having and sharing a vision to be very powerful. Our vision for our kids is for the ordinary things. Things that most people accept and take for granted as something that will happen without thinking about it.

Things like being part of the school and church community and having a job.

Before seeing the vision for your child, a school can think you are asking for the impossible. But it's all ordinary stuff and when people read it they realise that you are not asking for a lot - just the ordinary.

I have seen the reaction it gets over time. It puts things into a real life perspective.

LYN

# WHAT IS INCLUSION?

We have talked about people having ordinary opportunities and being included. But what do we mean when we talk about inclusion?

It is something very ordinary - with the right supports to make it happen.



“ Inclusion at school is about all kids being together in the same classes and schools. Not just for some lessons or subjects. With the support they need. ”

MARA SAPON-SHEVIN

## INCLUSION IS:

- a commitment to creating environments in which all children feel welcomed, accepted and honoured for who they are
- the belief that everyone benefits from knowing, interacting with and learning from a wide range of other individuals
- the understanding that we are all different and all the same. We are all human beings that seek connections, affection, and opportunities to learn and grow and belong. And we all have different strengths, challenges, and needs for support
- the recognition that if we want to make a better world for everyone we all need to learn to be comfortable, skilled and enthusiastic interacting with a wide range of people.

## INCLUSION IS NOT:

- a place
- a service
- letting children with disabilities join typical children for particular activities.

For me inclusion is about Hannah fully participating - not doing something else. Last term the school musical took place. This followed three terms of rehearsals and preparation. The kids involved would stay back every Monday until seven and order pizza. It was wonderful for Hannah to have the opportunity to be part of that - to meet kids from other grades with the same interest and to share in the experience. There was a real bond between the kids by the time the musical took place. Kids still stop and talk to Hannah.

She did not have a stand out part but she was part of it. There was no expectation that the family would stay. She was just allowed to be part of the group. It was inclusion at its best - a real opportunity to be part of the gang. Other parents also saw her there as just one of the kids. Often, parents are the ones you need to win over as parents' attitudes rub off on kids.

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## SUPPORT TO MAKE INCLUSION HAPPEN

Support is available for students with disability to be included in an ordinary class. Support will vary between students and schools and is available for all students who need extra support – including those with very high support needs.

It can be useful to get information about the kinds of support that are possible. You can get informed by talking to other families, going to workshops or doing some internet research.

Talking to an organisation like Family Advocacy can save you time and energy. They can talk to you about what you need to know and point you in the right direction!

Some families say they can only imagine how their child can be included when they hear about how other families are making this work for their child.

Even though Mac was in a mainstream day care and preschool we couldn't get our head around how he could be included at school. It was because we had been so exposed to people with disability being segregated in different places.

But we only needed to hear about inclusion in practice to know the myths were wrong. We heard a mum talk about how her son with high support needs was included and then it all made sense.

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## INCLUSION IN ACTION

Making inclusion work means considering carefully the following three things:

- School climate
- What we teach – curriculum
- How we teach

Understanding these three things can help you identify when your child is being supported well, and when they are not.



# SCHOOL CLIMATE

There are five key parts of welcoming school communities:



For classrooms to be warm and welcoming settings, teachers must make an effort to establish classroom norms of acceptance and respect.

One important way this can happen is by teaching about differences – sharing accurate information and using terminology that is respectful and non-offensive.

For example, a teacher might explain, “We all learn in different ways in our classroom - Marcus uses the computer to write

because it’s easier for him to type than to hold a pencil. Kylie communicates through her touch-talker; she can tell us what she wants and needs by tapping on her keyboard.”

Families can influence the school climate. Principals play a large part in setting the tone for the school. What would be of benefit is teacher development that the principal also attended, about what inclusion is and is not. We did not always have a positive and proactive principal. When that was our experience we pitched our meetings and communication more at the teacher level.

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Or, in order to model respect for multiple intelligences, a teacher might explain, “There are so many ways to be smart and in our classroom we’re going to learn about how each of us is smart. Tony reads really hard books and loves to talk about them; Fiona is so good at helping people share their feelings; and Matthew can make really wonderful designs on the computer.”

Inclusive classrooms also require that an atmosphere of cooperation is established and competition is minimised. Students are encouraged to work together and to help one another. One might hear phrases like this:

“If you’re having trouble with your work, check with someone else at your table and ask them to help you.”

“Let’s see if we can all work together to get the materials put away quickly so that we have time to hear an extra chapter of our mystery book.”



“Make sure that you and your partner have done your classroom job and that you help one another to get it done.”

Organising learning competitively is incompatible with creating inclusive settings. If we openly acknowledge and recognise that learners are different, then it makes little sense to rank them or ask them to compete with one another. We need to create settings in which all children can succeed and also recognise that an accomplishment for one child will differ from the accomplishments of another child.

We need to create classrooms in which, if a visitor were to ask, “Who’s the smartest kid in this class?” the students would not have only one answer. They would respond by naming the gifts and skills of all children: Carlos writes amazing poems, Naomi is really good at helping people solve their problems when they’re fighting and Peter can draw animals really well.

## WHAT WE TEACH - CURRICULUM

Inclusive education requires the recognition that every student can be meaningfully involved with curriculum, but that there will be different points of entry into that content and different levels of engagement.

For example, a grade four classroom is working on studying Australia, with a particular focus on geography.

Most of the students in the class are studying the map of Australia and some of the learning goals are naming and labelling the states and cities.

Mike is working with a similar map, but his objectives involve him gluing labels on the map in appropriate places.

Alicia is doing a puzzle of Australia, and she is able to practice her fine motor skills by manipulating the wooden puzzle pieces.

Carolina, who communicates with a touch-talker, has had her machine programmed with the responses “Sydney,” “Melbourne,” “Brisbane” and “Perth” and she responds to questions from her peers about various places by pushing the right button.

Making inclusion work means that there should be specific classroom teaching about diversity and how we treat one another. Not only should teachers offer honest, accurate, age-appropriate explanations of differences, but they also need to talk openly about why inclusion is important:

“We live in a very big world with lots of kinds of people so in our class we’re going to learn about lots of differences so that we can grow up to be informed and competent in the world.”

“I’m going to organise our classroom so that you have lots of opportunities to work with all your classmates - sometimes you’ll get to choose who you work with, and sometimes I will. I want everyone in here to know and understand everyone else.”



Grace's class presented a report on an excursion. All the kids needed to report one part. Some kids gave lots of information. Grace wrote and presented one sentence along with the other kids. She contributed to the report and could do that sentence well. She was doing the same thing as the other kids.

ALISON

## HOW WE TEACH

In order for inclusion to be effective, teachers must recognise that all students learn in different ways, and that providing multiple ways for students to engage with the curriculum enriches classroom learning for all.

Teachers can differentiate in terms of:

1. What content is presented
2. The process through which students engage with the material
3. How students demonstrate their learning or growth

For example, if the class is studying native animals, there are books written at many levels and also DVDs and other forms of media. Students don't need to all read the same book, and they can show what they learn in various ways as well.

For example, Marissa, who is a good reader and writer, can read more complex texts and write a play in which she casts her classmates, all of whom have lines compatible with their skills. A student with a touch-talker can use her machine to deliver her lines. A child with limited language skills can be given a part that pushes him (just enough). A child with mobility issues might be a narrator or become the prompter for others.

Jacob's art class was using clay to create a Grecian pot. The teacher found that because of his sensory issues, Jacob would not touch the clay needed to create the pot. She decided that Jacob could create the same pot but in paper mache. She had come to realise that he loved to rip up paper. This was an ideal strategy because he had the same result as the other students but just in a different medium using something that Jacob was really good at, ripping up paper and gluing.

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Another student might find photos of animals, and, with assistance, develop a poster with questions - which could then be displayed for classmates' participation: "Which of these animals are nocturnal?"

Hannah has had some very dedicated teachers during her nine years at school that have embraced our commitment to an inclusive education. She has a Geography teacher who has some great strategies to include Hannah. He discretely hands her a question on a piece of paper when she enters the classroom. He then goes around the room asking students questions, coming back to Hannah with her question when he can see she has an answer. He explained that it shows the other children that she is just as capable of answering a question as the rest of the class.

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What is important about these examples is that students are working at their own level but still interacting with peers. This contrasts with a teacher who does "business as usual" with 25 students and then has the student with a disability doing something completely different, in isolation, often working with an aide as opposed to with peers.

## ROLE OF FAMILIES IN SCHOOL INCLUSION

A lot of what happens at school is in the control of principals, teachers and other professional staff.

But families have a very important role too. There are some things about your child that you will always know best and schools will be better able to support your child if you play an active role.



I think there should be a partnership between professionals and families. What happens at school impacts on what happens at home and vice versa.

Schools will be less able to modify curriculum without a deep knowledge of what the student needs. Families have that deep, long term knowledge.

Also, schools cannot know how families function and do things without their input. Without the benefit of this long term knowledge, professionals cannot be as effective.

SHARI

Here are some things you can do to be more confident and effective in your role:

### **TAKE THE TIME**

Sit as a family and think about what you want for your child. What is your vision or dream for the future? Write it down. This dream you have can help to guide the choices you make about school and beyond.

### **GATHER INFORMATION**

Even though students with disability go to mainstream classes all around the world, schools have different levels of experience teaching students with disability. The more you know about what good inclusion looks like the more able you will be to notice when your child is not being supported well. You do not have to do all the research yourself. Reading booklets like this one is a great start!

### **GET INVOLVED**

If you get involved in the school community you will know more about what is going on. You will have more chances to develop relationships with staff and to be available to ask any questions that may come up. Not everyone has the time to do this but it can help to be involved as much as you are able.

### **BE POSITIVE**

Keep in mind that we all like praise and most people start to dread seeing someone who only has negative things to say. If something good happens, express your delight. Actively build a positive relationship by recognising the efforts and achievements of the teachers and school even if it is small steps. Encouragement usually creates more positive and continued efforts. Some families have sent encouraging letters to the school principal about a positive teacher or event, or to a regional director about a great principal.

### **BE MORE CONFIDENT IN SPEAKING UP**

Families are expected to play a role in speaking up around issues that affect their child. You will have chances to say what you want for your child when you enrol and at school meetings. You can also make an appointment to talk about things that worry you. The more practice you get the more confident you will be to speak up if you need to.

### **YOU DO NOT HAVE TO HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS**

Family Advocacy can give you information and ideas. You can also learn from the experiences of other families.

# TIPS TO ACHIEVE INCLUSION

Tips from families about achieving inclusion at primary and high school.



## Tips for primary school

- Think about your vision for the future and prepare a vision statement.
- **Allow time for the school to get ready and adjust.**
- Let the school know you want to be kept informed and be involved around decisions relating to your child.
- **Be there and be involved for the benefit of the whole school community. For example, I helped the school seek improvements to the computer room when it was problematic.**
- The most successful approach for inclusion is a cohesive learning team. A pleasant, collaborative team is the ideal. This does not always happen but it should be the goal.
- **Be a role model. At primary school, people watch. Give people a visual picture of how your child can be included. One year I pushed Jye's wheelchair in the cross country. After that I didn't need to push. His mates did.**
- Schools need to be told about your child's passions/interests so that they can teach to their strengths.
- **Make your expectations clear from the beginning.**

## Tips for high school

- A lot of time and planning is involved.
- **Identify the person who will provide support (as an aide). We did not leave this to the school. We explained why we thought it was important to be part of the process. We were keen for the person to be someone that Jacob could relate to - this turned out to be a young man. Because he was the right person he has been able to handle things appropriately and put issues in perspective.**
- Don't be afraid to speak up if something is not acceptable. For example, Jacob is at high school and I made it clear that colouring cartoons was not acceptable. It was not age appropriate and no other student would be doing it. It would make him stand out in a negative way. Recently, Jacob came home with a coloured cartoon character. I had to have a discussion with the school because I could not let that go. It was too important. I found out that his normal aide and teacher had been absent and that a substitute teacher had given him the task. Jacob had been given the cartoon task as a reward. I said that it still wasn't appropriate as other students would not be given the same thing as a reward.
- **If you don't have ongoing discussions about what is and isn't ok there can be a lot of grief.**
- Do not be surprised if you need to revisit issues.
- **Nothing will be perfect - there will always be things that come up due to changes, absences, misunderstandings and lapses.**
- You need to decide the best way to approach each issue. Sometimes it may be a discrete talk with the aide. Sometimes you may need to go straight to the deputy or principal.

Sharing your vision for your child's future is invaluable.

It gives educators a complete picture of what you expect and what your child is capable of - their strengths. What is important will vary between families.

When Jye started school we made a book with photographs of Jye doing a range of things with members of the community. The effect was very powerful.

At high school we changed our approach and I made a PowerPoint presentation to teachers from the school. I also provided a copy of the presentation in a folder.

I gave the teachers lots of chances to ask all their questions including hard questions. It was a really positive way of sharing what Jye can do and achieve. It also gave them a sense of where our family is coming from; we don't know it all and people don't need to know it all for inclusion to work.

I was helping at a recent excursion and I noticed that one of the teachers had a photocopy of our vision for Jye in his bag. He obviously thought it was useful. It gave him a sense of what would be a successful experience for Jye.

SHARI

The following tips from parents make it clear that how you communicate with your school is important. Keep in mind there is no 'one size fits all' approach.

## Communication Tips

- Be firm but flexible.
- **Allow time for the school to learn and understand your vision.**
- The school principal can have a big impact on how open to inclusion the rest of the school is. It is worth spending time to help the principal to understand your vision.
- **Be careful if you use the word inclusion. People may not have the same understanding as you. People have their own perception. People can sit and nod leading you to think there is agreement but they are interpreting meaning through their own lens. We talk more about the consequences of things - like what it would mean to be removed from learning environments.**
- Informal chats are not the forum for making big decisions. It is fine for you to say that you want to think about or discuss something further before you decide.
- **We make it clear that we are not setting up the school to fail. We say that we want to help so that they can enjoy what we do.**
- Build a good relationship with the school.

Surprisingly, I have found communication much better at high school where there are 10 teachers not 1. All the kids have diaries and write in events and happenings - with support where needed.

This year a great system has been introduced. Each day, students with support have a timetable with any changes and an area next to each subject where teachers can write a comment. Students can also note how they felt about each lesson. It is only a small space but it gives you a glimpse of what is happening.

LYN

I find it hard to work things out and know how to say things without offending people. I find it hard to work with teachers. I'm not naturally good at it.

Things can build up and seem very dramatic very quickly.

My tip is to talk to other people. It can help you sort out what is important. If it is someone you trust, they can offer another perspective.

KATE



## At meetings with the school

- Meetings should be attended by both parents or two adults with an interest in the child. You can certainly request that the meeting date or time be changed so that this can happen.
- **Try to never go alone. Even though most meetings are positive you never know.**
- Set the tone by your attitude at the beginning of the meeting.
- **Know what you want to accomplish.**
- Know what you are talking about – do your research.
- **Have a written agenda for the meeting.**
- Be assertive and confident but not aggressive when talking.
- **Give praise when praise is due.**
- Be respectful and listen to what is being said.
- **Ask questions if you aren't sure of what they mean.**
- Recognise that nothing is going to be perfect.
- **Don't be afraid to call an end to a meeting or say you need to think about something.**
- When the meeting is finished ensure everyone knows what they are expected to do and when. You could do this by sending a follow up email noting your understanding.
- **If you forget something or change your perspective it is fine to email later. You need to be brave enough to say when you have rethought something or that something is not sitting well with you.**

# INCLUSION MYTHS AND REALITIES

You may have been told some things about inclusion already. You may be told some more things in the future. Do not assume that everything you are told is true or based on research. It can be good to know what you can say when you hear something that does not sound right.



Read about these myths to help you sort out fact from fiction!

MYTH	REALITY
Inclusion means that all children have to perform at the same level of skill or competence in order to be together.	Inclusion means supporting students whose skills are different so that they can interact together.
Inclusion is a favour we do for people with disabilities - allowing them to be included in typical educational settings.	Inclusion is a fundamental right and doesn't have to be earned.
The education of "typical children" will be negatively impacted by the presence of children with disabilities.	Typical students' education is not negatively affected, but they <b>do</b> learn to be thoughtful, respectful, compassionate and informed about a wide range of differences.
Typical children are not capable of accepting children with disabilities and will be uncomfortable and ill-at-ease.	All children are capable of learning to accept all kinds of differences and this often leads to their ability to be accepting of themselves and their own strengths and challenges.

We have only ever had positive comments about David being in the class. It is something I would want for all my kids - for them to be exposed to diverse environments.

For some kids it is instinctive - they just accept others. For others, it is the job of teachers and parents to model and teach that acceptance.

KATE

You need to get people away from the idea that people are broken or need to be fixed. They are not sick. People are often considered from a medical perspective.

Research says that inclusion benefits all kids.

ANNETTE

# PITFALLS OF INCLUSION

Schools may put in place solutions for including a student at school that only serve to make true inclusion more challenging. Here are some common examples to look out for.



## “We’ll include kids when we think they’re ready for the regular classroom”

It’s highly likely that if we wait for students to be ready, they will never gain access to learning environments in which they can best learn the skills they need. Inclusion is a right and shouldn’t have to be earned. Inclusive practices recognise that it is the general education classroom that needs to be more accommodating and differentiated - not the child that needs to “change” to “fit in.”

Including a student with a disability doesn’t assume that the child will do work at the same level or that the goal is for the child to “keep up” with the rest of the class. Inclusion means that we will find meaningful ways for that child to engage with the curriculum and with their peers.

Someone once said to me... "I don't want to be mean, but he's just not ready." Jacob is now 15 and some people might still say he isn't ready. People say 'as long as they are toilet trained, have social skills etc.' But these things are not critical for inclusion to occur. Waiting may sound sensible but if you wait for someone to be ready, the gap gets bigger. The person will be in a class with kids they don't know. It disrupts the rhythm of their life. Schools only have a person for a part of their life and the focus tends to be on academic considerations - not the person's whole life.

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## We'll put all the kids with disabilities together in one room and call it "the inclusion class".

All classrooms in the school should be inclusive, not just one. Think about it: if one classroom is "the inclusion classroom" then are the other classrooms the "exclusion classrooms"?

The goal is to change the structure and functioning of the whole school, modelling that inclusion is what we do here and not a special learning situation for only some students.

## We'll tell the classroom teacher she doesn't have to change anything and send in an aide to work with Billy.

All teachers need support in order to make inclusion work, but addressing students' needs must be the work of a team, not something that is relegated to one person. Inclusion requires making the classroom welcoming, accepting and accommodating for all learners and this means that it can't be "business as usual" but must reflect serious attention to climate, curriculum and how we teach.

Assigning an aide to one student often results in a "Velcro aide" situation in which unnecessary dependence is built between the student and the person assigned to help them. This can also function as a barrier to building relationships with other students. Aides and other support staff need to circulate and work with a range of students so they don't become identified as "Billy's teacher."

## We won't talk to the other students about the child with a disability. That way we won't be making a big deal out of it, and maybe they won't even notice.

When we fail to address differences openly, we communicate that it is somehow bad or dangerous to be different and impossible to talk about differences. Without necessarily singling out individual children, teachers can make sure that they answer students' questions honestly and that they provide big lessons about diversity, support, friendship and kindness that will be useful for all students. Children certainly notice differences but it's the adults around them who teach them to make sense of those differences and how to respond.

Contrast the classroom in which the teacher slipped sugar-free cookies to the girl with diabetes so that (theoretically) no one needed to know about her condition ...with the classroom in which the children all **knew** their classmate had diabetes, what it meant, and how to think about snacks that everyone could eat.

We made sure that we were around enough so the other students got to know us and would learn that questions were never off limits. We made sure there were opportunities for the other children to ask questions knowing they would never be "shushed". We told teachers that if they didn't know the answer to a question about Mac they could say "I don't know. Let's ask Mac's mum when she comes in." Mac uses a feeding tube and he is never fed in private. It is not mysterious. One of Mac's friends commented that he wishes he had a feeding tube so he could use it if he was tired or had to eat things like broccoli. It could just go down the tube.

GINA

# WHAT INCLUSION TEACHES US

Creating inclusive school communities has the potential to teach all of us - children and adults - those with disability labels and those without - many important lessons. They are lessons not about schooling or education but about how we want to create a world together. They are lessons about how the world can be and how we can be active in making the world better. These lessons can be helpful in understanding inclusion better yourself and in explaining the importance of inclusion to those who still don't understand.



Some people you talk to will not know about students with disability being included at school. They may not understand why you want your child included. Here are some lessons that we know from the experiences of children included around the world. It could help you explain inclusion to others.

## WHAT ARE THESE LESSONS?

- 1. Understanding differences:** Inclusion has the potential to teach us to be knowledgeable and comfortable with a wide range of differences.
- 2. Perspective:** Being with people who are challenged by situations in which we feel at ease or who are comfortable in situations in which we feel stretched teaches us important lessons about perspective. This ability to see the world through someone else's lens greatly expands our ability to navigate an increasingly complex world and do so with grace and skill.
- 3. Real safety:** Inclusion can help us understand that there are many ways (all of them important) for people to be safe in their lives. Physical safety is certainly important, but people need to feel psychologically and emotionally safe in order to thrive as well.
- 4. Exclusion hurts everyone:** Learning to be inclusive later in our lives is harder if we have not early on established the habit of noticing others, showing compassion and thinking about their feelings. These can be learned in inclusive schools.
- 5. Giving and receiving help graciously:** One of the greatest gifts of an inclusive environment is that there are multiple opportunities to be helpful and to receive help as well.

"That's unjust" Mac's classmate told the teacher.

It wasn't an obvious or major incident according to the teacher, but Mac's peer was entirely right. It seems everyone in the class had just been given some sort of choice or option in class and Mac wasn't offered the same opportunity.

Hence the declaration to the teacher, by Mac's mate, that it was "unjust". Mac's teacher agreed the student was absolutely right. Mac's teacher, Mr B took it on the chin, as he always does, and notched another one up to the "ongoing learning opportunities" you get when Mac is in your class. More delightfully, Mr B, shared the incident with me, clearly showing a sense of pride that his students will speak up when things aren't "just".

Mac's nine year old classmate has grown into a considerate, delightful young man with (clearly) an innate sense of social justice.

A good friend indeed.

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6. **Responsibility to one another:** Closely related to giving and getting help is the understanding that none of us actually functions fully independently in life. Independence is a myth and not a reasonable goal. We all need one another.
7. **Honesty about hard topics:** In the same way that inclusion teaches students to be aware and well educated about individual differences, it also provides a place to learn about challenging topics. We learn to talk about the uncomfortable, the unspeakable and the painful.
8. **Courage:** There are many kinds of courage that can be learned by everyone involved in inclusive schools. Perhaps most important, there is the courage to stand up for those who are marginalised or oppressed and the courage to stand up for what is right, even when it's hard or you're the only one.

I was collecting Mac from the school excursion at the local zoo and was met by Mac and his mate K.

K: "Mac smells like pig smell" he said in a manner that 'implied' I should consider this a good thing.

I admit, I was a teeny bit worried. Let's face it - no one wants their kid to be known as "Smelly" or "Stinky Burns" or (deep breath in) "Pig Smell".

Me: "Oh, OK then - is that good?" I asked wincing just a tad.

K: "Yeah! It's awesome" he confirmed. "Mac couldn't reach the pig to pat him so I leant over the fence and patted him then wiped the pig smell on Mac's hands and arms so he had some too".

Me: "Yep, you're right - that's cool".

So there you have it...pig patting by proxy, sharing pig smells & including your mate. Yep, that's what we fight for.

GINA

# BUILDING FRIENDSHIPS AND SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Inclusion isn't just about what happens within the walls of the school. Inclusion means making sure that all children have social relationships and friendships in all aspects of their lives, including neighbourhood, place of worship, recreational situations, etc.



## WHY DO FRIENDSHIPS MATTER SO MUCH?

Time spent in school will eventually end for all students, and it is the relationships that have been built with others that will make the difference throughout the life of a person with a disability.

Our vision is that students with disability will have people to engage with throughout their lives. Their peers will also be in positions as adults to provide leadership in making inclusion a societal reality. Students who have grown up comfortable and knowledgeable about disabilities will be more likely to employ a person with disability, include a person with disability in social and recreational settings, and honour and value the unique contributions of all people. So, inclusion matters for all of us!

The friends that Nathan has now are the friends he made at school and during social engagements when he was growing up.

JO

## HOW CAN WE MAKE THIS HAPPEN?

- Provide a wide range of “typical” experiences for students with disability such as sports events, the beach, amusement parks, concerts, etc. Find out what other children this age are doing and see if it's possible to find a way for your child to participate as well.

- Be very thoughtful about how you talk about your child with disability. Use language that is descriptive and builds connections rather than focuses on a deficit or a label:
  - ✦ “Marta can’t talk to you, but she really loves animals, and I’m sure she’d like to see your dog”.
  - ✦ “Fred gets a little nervous if you get too close to him, but he’d like to hear your jokes and he has a communication board where he can tell you what he thinks - do you want to see how it works?”
  
- Encourage your child to initiate social interactions as well, providing whatever support is necessary. You may have to help others know “what to do”, since they may be awkward or worried about what is expected, but you can help facilitate this: “Eli would like to pay for his ice cream now - you can put the change into his hand”.

The possibility of friendship is one of the main reasons she's at this school - peers and the relationships she forms. Grace goes to sleepovers, parties, plays in the playground with the other kids, gets involved in handball - all the usual things kids do at school. She is also involved in a dance class outside of school.

If you think your kid will not have friends it's not true. There is a wide spectrum of kids at school.

I think it is great that there are 80 kids in her year. Like anyone, there will be people who like her and people who do not. It gives her more chances to make friends. There are more chances for there to be people who like her.

ALISON

Our focus is on social inclusion so we ask specific question about David's interaction with other students. Does he work with other students? Does he talk to other students? Does he play with other kids at lunch?

If David is left to choose how to go about a task he is likely to sit by himself and get through his work. I make a point of talking about our desire for David to engage with other students.

We are talking to the school about something we started called 'a bunch of mates'. David's bunch of mates is a group of his friends that he has invited to be part of.

We helped him get the names together. It is something we heard about others doing to support a vulnerable individual. The group comes together every week at school and every 2 or 3 weeks to do something out of school. The format is that we eat, chat about what is happening - like excursions - and how David could be better included and then do something fun. We have gone to the beach, played football, been to the pool. The kids really enjoy it. It's been the best thing.

One thing we did was to play games to find out what people are interested in so we could see if they shared interests with David. A couple of kids were interested in robots so we did a robot activity one day and invited someone with particular skills.

Someone else said they love sailing and invited David to come. David hasn't sailed before and we don't know if he will like it but he won't know unless he tries.

Parents have also been involved. They know they can come to get togethers. Dads have helped setting up cricket games. Another dad did footy.

When asking people to get involved we are putting ourselves out there and we are putting David out there but it's been really powerful.

KATE



Grace's friends help her to know about what other kids her age are wearing, listening to and watching. Grace is not up with everything. She likes Peppa Pig but most other 10 year olds have moved on.

Her friends know this and we encourage them to talk about things they are interested in. We tell them that we want her experiences broadened.

When she has a birthday and kids ask me what to get her, I suggest that they get music - or something else that they like. I am also thinking it would be good for Grace to go shopping with a friend to choose things.

ALISON

Grace is at an age where she gets a lot of guidance around social skills from friends rather than from me. She tends to listen to them more than me.

Her friends are good observers and put her right about basic things like how to sit on the floor so your undies don't show or what birthday party etiquette is. They are bold and don't have inhibitions around social correctness.

She has gained a lot - including how to play fairly. They make it clear when she is out in games like handball.

I have sometimes spoken to her friends to help with something.

I cannot emphasise enough how important it is. You can't do it yourself.

ALISON

- Help children learn the skills they will need to navigate unfamiliar social situations. Practice what you say at a party, or how to enter a playground and find someone to play with. Rather than assuming that a child with disability can't participate, provide whatever scaffolding might be necessary to make it happen. A parent of a child with a cognitive disability helped his child learn what to do at a relative's funeral including what to say in the receiving line, how to pass tissues to those who were crying, and how to whisper during the service.
- Be alert to what other children your child's age are wearing, listening to on the radio, watching on TV, etc. One parent realised that she was dressing her 13 year old daughter in completely inappropriate clothes for her age when other students kept asking "Is she four years old?" As her daughter developed friendships, her peers helped her pick out appropriate "cool" clothes and went with her to have her ears pierced. Teddy-bear prints were replaced with rock group t-shirts.

Social skills come from an immersion in the regular class. He sees his peers modelling behaviour. Mac is an only child so it is important for him to see kids doing all kinds of things - good and bad. I don't mind if he sees kids fighting. He needs to see and learn. If he only saw positive things he would not be getting the full flow of life. He needs full immersion in everyday ordinary life. Now he has a cracker of an angry face and I think that is terrific. We have talked about how and when to use the face appropriately.

GINA



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throughout this booklet.*

Being at the local school in the typical class has been the best and most affirming decision we have made - for Grace and for our family. She is learning more than anyone ever thought was possible, fully reaching her potential, and has lots of friends who support and fully include her in the community.

ALISON

The safest place for Mac is to be respected as a member of his community, to be engaged as a member of his community and to actually be in his community. The most dangerous place is for him to be an outsider and not part of the community. So that is where he has to be - embedded in his community.

GINA

*family*

A D V O C A C Y

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