

Books -- The perfect disability awareness tool!

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By Lisa Simmons

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I don't know any parent or teacher of young children that doesn't believe in the benefits of reading to kids. Virtually all of them include "story time" in their daily routine. Books have the power to capture a child's imagination & take them on wonderful journeys. They also have the power to help them understand new things & to send positive messages. All of these qualities make books an ideal choice when adults are searching for ways to help non-disabled children understand the world of a child with special needs. If you are a parent or teacher interested in doing some simple disability awareness training, then I would offer these tips:

1. Start with the right story.

Select a story that your reading audience can relate too, but also select a special needs character that will be relevant to their life. Do you currently have a special needs child in your class? Do they have friends or neighbors with a disability? Do you know someone who could come & talk to the class as a friend or guest about their own disabilities? Use your chosen story to help everyone relax. Young kids relate well to the characters in stories. If you use a story with a positive message it will help set a great "tone" for what you'll be saying later.

2. Don't stop with just the story.

After the story, be sure you take advantage of the "teachable moment". Talk about the things that can be more difficult for a child with special needs. Young children are naturally empathetic. They feel the pain of the book character that gets hurt & worry about the fate of their favorite TV character when he's in trouble. Don't be melodramatic about things; just be "real" about what tasks would be harder for a child with the disability you are discussing.

3. Include a child or adult with special needs.

This can be accomplished by inviting an adult with disabilities to your classroom as a guest, including a current or former special needs student as the "star" of your discussion or as parents just taking the

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opportunity to introduce your child to individuals with disabilities that are friends or acquaintances. This step is important because it reminds the kids that this is real life, not JUST a story. If you are worried about making the discussion awkward, then schedule the visit for a day or 2 after your story. This will allow the visitor to have center stage & give the kids a couple of days to think about the story & your follow up discussion.

4. Tell them how they can help!

If you are doing the awareness training to support a current class member, then do some pre-planning with the other adult involved (the child's parent if you are the teacher or vice versa). Decide together what support roles classmates can play. Will there be a transition buddy to help the child find areas away from the regular classroom. Will anyone besides the teacher be pushing the child's wheelchair?

Is it important for someone to sit next to them who can help them find activity supplies? Kids are natural helpers & this is a wonderful time to ask for volunteers who like to help out. Just remember to talk about exactly what they will need to do & when they should do (i.e. only when the teacher reminds you, every day after recess, etc.). For a more general discussion, it may be enough just to talk about issues like not teasing, ways to offer help respectfully, & different ways to communicate with each other.

5. Remind them we're more alike than we are different.

This is a great opportunity to help everyone see that kids with special needs are really just kids. You've already addressed how he or she is different, now spend some time talking about how s/he's just like them. Help lay the groundwork for future friendships by talking about all the "regular kid" things your current class member or invited guest. Practice a simple conversation about their interests that you & the special needs child can have in front of the class. Not only does the child have the opportunity to share about themselves, but also you demonstrate how to communicate with him/her in a very non-threatening way.

6. Answer questions honestly & address fears.

This is probably the most important thing you can do. Allow as much time as this takes so that you've answered all questions to the best of your ability. It will probably help to think through some possible questions & answers ahead of time just so you can phrase your answers in kid-friendly words. If you're not sure what questions they may ask, think back to when you first heard the child's diagnosis. What questions did you have? Chances are their classmates will have similar fears. Can he play games with us? Will I hurt her? How do I ask her a question? Will she ever be able to? (talk, run, etc.)

Hopefully these tips will encourage you to include stories as a frequent awareness tool in your home or classroom. If you are interested but not sure what books to use, you can find some excellent choices listed here:

For kids age 4-8: <http://www.ideallives.com/generic.jhtml?pid=81>

For kids age 9–12: <http://www.ideallives.com/generic.jhtml?pid=125>

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Lisa is the director of the Ideal Lives Project, providing practical support to special needs families & professionals. Visit on–line at <http://www.ideallives.com> or subscribe to her free newsletter at <mailto:ideallives-subscribe@topica.com>

That;s Funny, You Don't Look Like You have a Disability

By Lynda Appell

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That's Funny You don't Look Like You Have a DisABILITY

Editorial about how invisible disabilities are just as much disabilities as visible ones.

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Any one who can see that
a man, woman, boy, girl who is in a wheel chair has a visible disability.
Like wise seeing some one using a cane either as a walking aid or as help
for someone who is blind.

Conversely someone who has
an invisible disability, be it a learning disorder, a mental illness under
control with treatment, a person with chronic debilitating pain and many
other examples, too numerous to mention, are seen unless their disability
is known as not having anything disabling about them.

I am not implying that persons
with handicaps that are not readily seen are more disabled than those with
a handicap that is readily visible.

What I am saying that both
visible and invisible disabilities can both be a hardship and at times
even devastating to the individual.

Just because a disability
can not be seen doesn't mean it's any less disabling than one that can
be seen by most people.

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This doesn't doesn't necessarily mean more so. It means that a visibility of disability should not be the sole criteria of who is considered disabled.

To me there is one very important exception to the above. The person with an invisible disability

has to deal with not only their disability but the public's attitude toward it. For it's easy to realize some one who is physically challenged as being impaired. It's harder to realize that a person who may look normal may also have an impairment.

Disabled disability activist for over twelve years in my local Community Support Program and Artists for Recovery.



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