

Encourage Children's Positive Attitude Toward Those With Special Needs



By Karen Stephens

A friend of mine is a single dad raising two boys. His second child (I'll call him Tom) is five years old. He was diagnosed with cerebral palsy about a year after he was born. The conditions of his impairment have resulted in making Tom different from most children in a number of ways, some minor — others rather significant.

For mobility Tom needs a wheelchair. Controlling his larger muscles is hard, so he can't eat as neatly as the next child. He comprehends everything he hears, but his spoken language is almost non-existent. To compensate, he excels at facial expression — especially with his eyes — to convey his feelings and intentions. His bright mind is alert, curious, and strong-willed, but in terms of academics, he won't keep up with his peers who can more easily master speaking, reading, and writing language.

So you could know him better, there are a few more differences I could name, but there's really no need. To know what makes Tommy "tick" would be to know what makes any other five year old tick.

In more ways than I can count, Tom is more similar to other children than different. He adores his father. He lights up when he enters a room, and cries a bit when he leaves. He has favorite foods (ice cream), and isn't shy about letting you know what he considers yucky. Coloring is a favorite pastime, especially when another child joins him.

Tommy loves outdoors. Shooting hoops is "tops" on his list. Watching the Bulls with dad and brother is his idea of a great weekend. And dance, oh, that boy loves to dance. When music comes on, his head starts bobbing. When someone waltzes him around, his grin stretches farther than ear to ear.

But Tom is also challenging like others his age can be. When frustrated, he can wail and throw a tantrum to beat the band. ('Tis not a pretty sight, let me tell you.) But when one of his friends falls down and sheds a tear, Tommy literally cries in sympathy until he's reassured his friend is alright. Could anyone ask for a better kind of friend?

At child care and school, kids and staff warm up to Tom in seconds. Because he's so friendly and engaging, he's quite popular and often a sought-after play partner. Once you get to know Tom, you quickly realize that, at heart, he really is a very typical child. He invites openness, fairness, and love. But of course, the pivotal phrase is "once you get to know him."

When in public, it's sometimes — not always — but often a different story. Some people — usually adults — let Tommy's disability keep them from seeing the "real" him, the spirit inside. They focus on Tom's differences rather than interacting with him like they would another child.

And sometimes, without even realizing it, they act as if there is something "wrong" with Tom. You know, the kind of wrong that means he should be avoided, as if his disability is contagious and could be "caught" like a cold.

For instance, his dad "Bob" says passers-by on the street or at the park seem determined not to make eye contact with Tom. And when he takes Tom grocery shopping, he says the busy aisles part like the Red Sea. Other parents with kids pull their children close to their

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sides and tell them not to stare — even when the kids aren't staring. Bob says parents erupt with “shushes” if the children hazard to ask aloud why his son is getting a ride in that chair with wheels.

Bob loves it when other parents take interest in his son and ask about his age or school. After all, he's a proud papa just like the next guy. But spontaneous “parent talk” doesn't happen often. Sometimes folks act as if Tom is invisible.

Does the evasion hurt Bob's feelings? Of course it does. As a single parent he feels isolated enough; parenting a child with special needs can magnify the feeling. And, like any other parent, he worries about his child's feelings. I've wondered if little Tom picks up on some adults' hesitancy, their inability to approach him as easily as they do other children. It doesn't appear that he notices — yet. But then, that kind of thing is hard to express if you can't put it in words.

By averting their eyes away from Tom's special needs, some people rob themselves of the chance to enjoy and be uplifted by Tommy's positive, fun-loving attitude. It's their loss, truly. And they miss the chance to witness something even bigger: confirmation that we humans are incredibly resilient despite challenges thrown our way.

When we behave as if differences are scary or unpleasant to look at, we don't set an accepting role model for children. Noticing similarities and differences is just the way kids prepare themselves to cope with the broader world. Their minds are constantly engaged in observing and analyzing data around them; it's their job to make sense of their perceptions.

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Ninety-nine point nine percent of the time, children are simply curious about differences. In the preschool years, they don't assume differences are good or bad, scary or nice. It's often an adult's response that places a value judgment on a child's perception of difference. If parents act embarrassed or even scared, and immediately shush children's questions without further explanation, kids may assume they're asking about something bad or naughty.

When encountering differences, such as Tom's, children ask questions to help them understand and make sense of new information. Shushing won't make children stop asking the questions. They'll just stop asking you. If you aren't approachable about a topic, children will find someone else who is. And so, values about differences will be conveyed to your child by someone else. Personally, I'd rather be the primary one shaping my child's values.

Explaining differences is especially hard if we aren't comfortable with differences ourselves. Sometimes we're not even aware of our own biases until a child's question requires us to face them. Learning together as a family to understand similarities and differences, as embodied in my young friend Tom, is a great way to teach children (and ourselves) acceptance, tolerance, and respect for everyone.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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