

Parent Tips – Contact the World

One thing I run across on an all too frequent basis are situations where a child with a disability is being so sheltered from the world that the child cannot become part of the world. With spring and summer coming upon us, I think that this is something to talk about. Simply put, a child with a disability is still a kid. And, like any kid, that child wants to have fun and explore their world. As a parent, help make that happen!

When I run across a situation where a child is not having the opportunity to be a kid, it is usually not because of neglect. Instead, the parents are usually very loving and protective of that child and are doing everything they can think of to help the child deal with and overcome whatever disability exists. In working so hard to try and help the child, the parents often start seeing the disability and its impacts first. In doing so, the parents then will try and protect the child from situations where the disability may be seen or may impact how the child is treated. The family stops going places, doing things, and exposing the child to the world around them. Honestly, the worst offenders in this situation are usually the moms.

If you are one of these parents, then STOP!!! Step back. Think about all the things that your family could be doing. And go do them. The truth is that yes, sometimes bad things may happen. Stares or looks or comments. That is part of life, and something a child with a disability will need to learn to deal with appropriately.

But, an even greater truth is that many, many good things can and do happen as well. Often these things will take place when you least expect it, and can have lasting impacts on you, your family, and of course, your child. As many of you know, our son is 17 and is deaf. He also has motor skill issues as well. We have traveled, near and far, with him since he was a baby. We have also let him try things wherever possible. Sometimes this has meant some serious pre-planning and problem solving to reduce some of the risk. While following this practice, we have met some wonderful people in the world and, honestly, through him, made some connections that the average traveler usually doesn't make. The travels and experiences have in many ways made him very independent, and given him a degree of confidence and willingness to challenge the world. They also have helped him develop a healthy understanding of his world and a belief that he isn't really any different from anyone else.

Let me give you some examples of some of the things he has tried, and things that have happened to him:

One of the first indicators that life with Ian would be different was a trip to the National Zoo, in Washington, DC. Ian was about 4 years old. It was a slow day, and we were in the insect house. It just so happened that there was a group of interns from Gallaudet

University working. They saw us signing, and by the end of our visit to the insect house, we had moved from the viewing area to the back rooms, where Ian had been covered in large, Madagascar Hissing Cockroaches, had an insect called a Walking stick on his head, and was just having a ball with the bugs. I was looking for the Raid....

Ian has always liked animals. We combined that and therapy into therapeutic riding. What we thought was going to be just a therapy lesson turned into independent riding and early jumping skills. He still loves running a horse. Not bad independence and self-esteem building for a kid that wasn't supposed to walk. (By the way, it was hard on us as parents – Ian's grandmothers still won't watch him on a horse. The thought terrifies them.)

Or how about diving? I'm not talking the diving board. I'm talking underwater. My wife and I have been scuba divers since college. Ian kept asking to try. Well, it wasn't going to happen on scuba gear without training. Instead, on a vacation, we found a place that did helmet dives in about 20 feet of water. The folks there were fantastic. We went with him and they put an additional diver in the water for safety purposes, and I have film where you can barely see him for all the fish (it is amazing how much fish like Cheese Wiz). He had a ball. And he learned something about his world. And the folks who we worked with were talking about how they needed to start looking at the disabilities issue in a different light, and how they could offer their skills to others.

These are just 3 examples. I could probably write a book about the experiences we've had with Ian. I won't go into detail about the cruise this past summer where Ian wound up giving a group of about 20 folks an impromptu ASL class during a day at sea at the request of the cruise director. He learned he could stand up in front of a group and teach them something. He had Americans, Brits, a couple of Germans and others in the room. By the time the cruise was over, it seemed that so many folks knew him. We got, 'Oh, you must be his parents!'....

The bottom line is that it is hard to let any child explore their world. We put so much time and love and effort into helping them get through the day. And we want in the worst way to protect them from hurt and disappointment. This is particularly true for a child with disabilities. Nevertheless, to help the child succeed, that child has to try things and learn what he or she can and cannot do. Get the child out in the world. It doesn't have to be far. It can be church or the store or a park or petting zoo. And yes, it can be the far side of the world, if you so desire. It is amazing what the kids will learn. It is also amazing what they will teach others. And what they will teach you.

However, there is absolutely no way I'm jumping out of a perfectly good airplane!