

What We Learned from Club G

A Personal Story by Carmen Farrell

I grew up in an era where kids like Ges just weren't seen by kids like me. I grew up scared of differences and while I learned the outward behaviour of inclusion I never, ever fully understood it until Ges taught me. He is the pearl in my family's oyster. It's taken me years to figure that out. Think about it – he's the sand inside the shell that irritates, that doesn't fit. And over time, with his family's love and the support of his community he "becomes", he transforms from that irritating sand. And I think perhaps more significantly, so do we. How? Through our acts of compassion.

When my son started public school I felt I had to apologize for the resources it took for him to attend his local public school. That his presence was burdening the staff of our busy neighborhood school. I didn't apologize, but I felt that way.

It took his classmates to teach me otherwise. I honestly believe that many, if not most of his 60+ classmates are better human beings because they've been growing up side-by-side since Kindergarten. Their daily acts of compassion, of understanding and of kindness have been character-forming for them. Here's what I've seen.

1. There have been quite a few kids who, at different times in their lives, gravitate to my son because they themselves are feeling insecure for a while, or there is some way(s) in which they temporarily don't feel accepted by their peer group. In my son they find a safe place where they can feel secure because he's incapable of generating any playground politics. With my son, they never feel shame. He doesn't try to

have his way or to tell them to have a different experience. And in those interactions, something real grows. A relationship that isn't based on pity or on seeing differences. It's based on acceptance. You accept me and I accept you. Think what a profound impact that experience can have on a young child. I think it's life-long; it's character-forming.

2. Interacting with my son provides the majority of his classmates opportunities to take risks. Risks that they normally wouldn't be exposed to. Through these experiences they learn at an early age that they can be successful even if something is scary at first. Interacting with my son is an unusual experience. He can't talk intelligibly and he uses an iPad to type when he wants to get his message across. If you don't extend the invitation to join you the "right" way, he may ignore you or say no. But over the years these kids have learned to persevere with something as simple as getting a classmate to play with them. If you learn that lesson early in life, and it's repeated year in-year out, I think the ability to take appropriate interpersonal risks is a skill they will take into adulthood and it simply becomes part of their *modus operandi*.

3. Anti-bullying programs are great. But it's hard to learn new social norms from a 3-ring binder. The kids at Highlands have learned to be kind to someone "different". Even for a minority of kids, if my son remains something to feel unsure about, the norm that has been created by the vast majority of my son's peers shows them from an early age, that this is "how it's done". So they learn how to be kind, and bullying just doesn't happen.



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