



Being Comfortable Around Children Who Have Special Needs

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You see them at the mall, the park, or perhaps at your child's school. They may look different, act different, talk but can't be understood. You find yourself staring or watching out of the corner of your eye, though you know that staring is impolite and setting a bad example, but you can't help yourself. They make you feel uncomfortable and perhaps you secretly hope that they don't try to interact with you. They are children with special needs.

Most people do experience a certain amount of discomfort when approaching an unfamiliar person or situation for the first time. The anxiety often stems from the awkwardness in not knowing what to say, do or expect in relating with the unknown. Comfort and confidence comes from familiarity with a person or situation. As a parent, you are most likely going to have the opportunity to be in the company of children with special needs in a play group, during swim lessons, volunteering at your child's school or even playing in the park. A little background knowledge can lend itself to a great deal of assurance when in the company of children who have special needs. Sources of information can be found in articles in parent magazines, pamphlets, books and on parenting web sites. A good resource will describe a disability or diagnosis, including what the physical, social and cognitive range of capabilities is for the child. It should also give you ideas of the behavioural characteristics for a disability or diagnosis. These can sometimes be somewhat startling for someone who had not expected them. The best source of knowledge is gained from parents and caregivers who know the child best. In most situations, they have lots of background knowledge and, of course, know the child as an individual. Armed with some knowledge and understanding, a person will feel more

comfortable in the company of a special needs child and the child will, in turn, feel more at ease.

Another way to become more comfortable with special needs children is to gain some experience. Spending time in a program that integrates both typically developing and special needs children is one good way. It allows you to watch and observe how children relate to one another and how others can follow the child's lead. Engage those children in conversation even if it appears to be one sided. You'll gradually learn about what the child comprehends and he or she will enjoy the attention of a different adult. Volunteering for a special needs organization is also a great opportunity to gain some experience. It allows you to learn about the special needs of the children involved and some strategies for becoming more comfortable while working with them. Experience is the greatest teacher and provides us with the means to learn about these remarkable children.

Perhaps the most important word of advice given to those becoming comfortable around a child with special needs is to remember that underneath the disability or diagnosis is a child; a child who wants love, affection and attention like all children do. This becomes difficult to see sometimes when what first meets the eye are the physical, behavioural or cognitive issues. It is so crucial to look beyond that. This little person is a child first, possessing all the characteristics of youth and thus, deserves the same care and attention given to any child no matter what his or her circumstance may be.

