

Helping Your Child Unwrap The Gift of A

Special Needs Child

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What could it be like if we helped our child see that there is a gift inside every child?

Does your child ever come home and tell you about a situation at school that s/he sees as unusual? They might say something like:

“Mom, Susie just wouldn’t leave me alone today! She kept on asking me how many silly bands I have. She kept asking me again and again and she wanted to know the exact number. I don’t know how many I have and I don’t know what to say to her. How annoying!” Or, “You should have seen Johnny today in class, Mom. He was so angry. He had an outburst in class where he said disrespectful things to the teacher and the teacher sent him to the principal’s office.”

As parents, we may have many reactions. We may be caught off guard and react defensively, especially if our child appears uncomfortable or threatened. Or, we may be distracted with other “to do’s,” and miss out on this opportunity to listen. Something we may not even consider is the possibility that the child they are talking about has a special need, such as ADHD or something on the autism spectrum.

The truth is that it is different than when we were in school. There are more children in school today that are diagnosed with a developmental disability. According to the CDC (Center for Disease Control), 13% of all children have been diagnosed with a developmental disability. Some of these are mild, such as a minor speech or language impediment. More serious developmental disabilities include Down Syndrome and Autism. Autism alone impacts 1 in 110 children. ADHD is also very common; indeed, 9.7% of all children between the ages of 9 and 17 carry a diagnosis of ADHD.

Some of these diagnoses are readily observable, but others are not. Recognizing that your child’s peer may have a special need that impacts his or her behavior can help you to help your

child respond compassionately. Every time your child talks about a child who s/he perceives as different can become a teachable moment, a moment when you can help your child step into the shoes of others. If that sounds like an impossible task, fear not. You have already begun the important task of listening!

Good parent listeners allow their child to speak their mind while remaining neutral with their body language and interested with open-ended questions that foster curiosity and wonder. They do not talk for long periods of time, try to “fix it” for their child, get visibly upset or make judging comments.

Paradoxically, a good listener can also be a good teacher. It can be beneficial to purposely insert other perspectives or viewpoints to help your child think about the situation from the shoes of the other person. It’s our responsibility to ask open-ended questions like, “I wonder what it’s like to be Susie?” or “How do you suppose Johnny feels?” These questions help our children understand how we are all really the same on the inside. Remember, however, that they will be most effective when timing is taken into account, as most children will be more receptive after they tell their side of the story.

Each of us has gifts and challenges. How is it that we all have similar needs, like the need to be accepted by others and the need for companionship? There’s a gift just waiting to be opened inside of each one of us. When we teach our child to find that gift in another child, we will be the ones who truly receive. Let’s leave no package unopened.

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