

“No Limits”  
By Dennis Granzen

We received several responses to the request from the column in the last issue of Family Footnotes about how to address issues of disability and difference to labeled children, their siblings and their peers. I'd like to share some of those responses.

One mom shared how from a young age, her daughter with Down syndrome showed her awareness of her different physical appearance by pointing to pictures of others with Down syndrome and saying, “That’s me.” As a youngster, when offered opportunities to talk about her differences and to learn about Down syndrome, she showed little interest. Upon entering the middle school years, she demonstrated more of an active awareness of being different, and was open to learning more about Down syndrome.

However, towards the end of middle school and into high school she began making some negative statements about herself, i.e. “I’m stupid” and “I’m ugly”, and according to her mom her behavior deteriorated. Her mom attributed both the causes of her daughter’s negative self image and the ways to best address it to a number of factors, including a lack of meaningful inclusion in school (which only reinforced her feelings of otherness and undesirability) and some family dynamics that all children would struggle with. I’d also add that the age she developed these feelings is the same at which all children struggle with self image and belonging. She has been working with a therapist for almost a year, and has been addressing the issues she’s struggled with and is moving toward a healthier and happier image of herself. She’s also better included in school and better appreciated by her school staff and peers, which makes a difference. This story points to the credibility that peers and others have with a child, and that no matter how supportive a parent may be, these others can powerfully influence how the child sees herself. It also points to how as parents, our role is not necessarily to be everything to our children, but also to help them find the mentors and support they need that may not best come from us.

Another mom shared how at 10 years old her son with Asperger’s syndrome started asking why he was different and why he did “bad” things and made people angry. Acting on a suggestion from a therapist and utilizing her son’s love of books, this mom created a biography of her son, utilizing pictures, stories of his birth and explanations of his unique qualities, including a narrative and how they learned he has Asperger’s syndrome. It includes statements of what strengths and challenges are, and how people with Asperger’s syndrome share some of those as well as differ from each other. It also talks about how all of us can share our strengths and how we all need to work hard to address our challenges.

Heather Sarabia, a high schooler whose poetry appears in this issue of Family Footnotes, writes a letter to her classmates each fall to explain to them a bit about how she experiences autism. Her self understanding can point us to how to talk to others with autism about themselves. Last fall she wrote, “I have killer Autism. I am not ashamed to have this disease, but I am often embarrassed by the things it makes me do.” Heather’s

distinction between herself and how autism affects her behavior is important for all to understand, including those with autism.

Let's continue the conversation. Please continue to send us your thoughts and experiences, and we'll share them in future editions. Also, if you've found any resources, written or otherwise, let us know and we can come up with a list to share. Contact us through e-mail: [inclusion@fsrcdane.org](mailto:inclusion@fsrcdane.org) or by phone at 608/237-7639.