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Inclusion

We practice inclusion at the Little School. This means that we accept children with special needs into our program and make sure that they are fully integrated members of their class. When I tell this to parents looking at our school, the response I hear most often is, "Good." In the abstract, most families are pleased to think of a truly diverse school population. They are happy to think of a world in which differences disappear and true harmony exists. But sometimes parents worry, "What effect will it have on my child to share a classroom with someone with a language delay... with someone who doesn't respond when my child talks to him...with someone who is aggressive... with someone with obvious physical differences?"

In every classroom, there will be a wide range of behavior, of talents, of temperaments and personalities. There will be a wide range of needs and a wide range of demands made by individual children on a teacher. Differences rarely disappear and are not always cause for celebration but we can all learn to live with them and even to benefit from them. One of the things our nursery school does best is to help our wide range of children learn to get along with all sorts of people.

There are adults to get to know in every classroom and in the office. There are high school interns, college and graduate interns. There are people of different cultures and religions. There are babies and big siblings. There are parents and other caregivers. There are our own twos through fives and in each classroom there are the outspoken leaders, the quiet or reserved, more solitary children, the timid children and the confident, outgoing children. Most years there are aggressive children, angry children or children who have a hard time labeling their own feelings. We have had children with articulation difficulties, children with word processing troubles, children whose first language is not English or children with no language at all. We have children who seem not to notice that other children are even in the room or children who flinch every time another child comes near. And we have children who know how to explain what they

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want, express what they need, children who can talk circles around articulate adults, children who seem to have been born to socialize.

What do all these different children make of each other? Well, sometimes they are puzzled, sometimes they are a little afraid. They learn to tolerate first; they learn to appreciate eventually. And, almost always, these separate and distinct individuals learn to love each other the way only a group of children who share a positive school experience can. They learn to trust that adults can understand each and every one of them, that adults will try hard to be fair, that adults will keep everyone safe. They may try to talk for the child who has trouble with language. They learn how to approach a fearful child with caution. They learn how to draw out a withdrawn classmate.

And they even learn to set limits for the child whose first impulse may be to hit or grab and they learn to assert themselves and take pride in who they are.

And, I must add, they learn that it's okay not to like everyone. We don't all have to be friends. We do have to respect ourselves and each other.

Exposure to a wide range of children supports the growth of teachers as well. Teachers can't just promote an inflexible curriculum. They can't depend, for instance, on some textbook version of early childhood practice. They must think hard about individual needs and have a program that can adapt to those needs. Special Education teachers may be present as consultants or as members of a classroom team. They further enrich the school experience for children, for colleagues and for parents.

Some years ago before I was even committed to inclusion, I heard a director talking about inclusion at her school. She said that what she believed was that "kids are kids." This felt wrong to me. It sounded like denial to me. I knew I didn't want to accept children who were different and then pretend they weren't. I felt strongly at the time and still do that differences have to be acknowledged and addressed for the sake of everyone involved. Some differences may need remediation and some, affirmation.

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If I were to generalize, however, I would say that all children have special needs, some grave or even life threatening and some benign. At the Little School we look at each child and we try to figure out how best to serve that child's needs. We want every child to know we do that. We want every child to know that if a teacher is absorbed by one child today, that same attention may go to him the next day. We want every child to learn about her strengths, to understand his own challenges and to be able, someday, to take that understanding and use it to become the best that he or she can be.

Most of us did not grow up with inclusion. Many of us didn't even grow up in a world that was especially diverse. This is handicapping. We live in a complex and diverse society. We need to be able to get along with a wide range of people. Most of us have prejudices or some level of discomfort around people who are different from us. Perhaps it is unrealistic to believe this can change.

If we believe that it is possible, then, surely nursery school is the place to plant those seeds of change.

Kate