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THE IDEAS COLUMN

Using person centred thinking to engage and motivate children with SEN

Helen Sanderson and Antonia Kinman look at how to celebrate the shared qualities that make us who we are

All too often, people with learning disabilities find themselves defined more by their medical labels than by what it is that makes them who they are as a person, or how they are valued by their community. This issue, we are going to explore ways of celebrating group and individual identities at home and at school.

Class values/motto

This is an activity that can be enjoyed with students of all abilities, in both mainstream and special schools. The idea is to find out what kinds of behaviour are valued by the class, and to promote those kinds of behaviour as a group. There is something very powerful about having a shared value system within a group, and this can foster a real sense of belonging.

The important thing here is to ask the right questions. In most cases, asking “What sorts of behaviour do we all value?” isn’t going to get much of a response. “How do you want to be treated?” might be a better question for some students, or you might try questions like “Why is that not OK?” or “How does it make people feel?”

Where such questions may not be appropriate, pictures of social situations (somebody being shouted at or two people playing together, for example) and using happy and sad faces to show how these behaviours make us feel might be more effective.

In most cases, there will be a few things that stand out as values shared by most people in the class. These can be expressed as a list of rules, values or a motto. The next stage is to design a poster, a mural or even a crest to proudly display your class values where everybody can see them.

Giving students the opportunity to be involved in the process of defining what is and isn’t acceptable behaviour helps them become active participants in community building and creating inclusive environments.

Family identities

You can perform a similar exercise to the one above with your family to celebrate the principles that you share and value. Creating a poster or shield might work for some families but there are lots of other ways to celebrate your family identity. Katy and Seymour wanted a wall hanging in their home that reflected love, happiness, laughter, music and their heritage. “It cemented our understanding of what it meant to be a mixed race family, with our step-parenting challenges and celebrations”, said Katy.

Lou and John made a family star that hangs in their kitchen and reminds them of the values that they want to instil in their son, Jos. Alternatively, you could create a family motto, a flag, a song or whatever feels right for you and your family.



A sense of belonging

When welcoming new people to the family, either as a blended family coming together for the first time or as the result of fostering or adoption, it is important to get it right. What “right” is, of course, will change from family to family, but for Sally and Lucy, this meant a party. Sally is a single gay woman living in a tiny rural community that initially reacted with some trepidation to her decision to foster Lucy, who is nine, from Manchester and has a history of emotional and behavioural difficulties. A year after Lucy first came to live with Sally, they were told that Lucy could stay with Sally indefinitely. This was cause for celebration.

Over the year, Sally had noticed a shift in the attitudes of the community towards herself and Lucy. Initially, Lucy had found it difficult getting to know the local children but, as Lucy became more comfortable in her surroundings, she really took to the country lifestyle, getting involved with the local stables, taking part in community events and making friends. They were no longer seen as the “odd couple” but as integral and active participants in village life.

To celebrate Lucy’s new status as a permanent member of the family, Sally and Lucy wanted to hold a party. Lucy made the invites and together they decided who to invite. In addition

to their friends in the village, Sally’s parents travelled up from Cornwall and her sister came with her three children. There was a banner in Lucy’s favourite colour (pink) saying “Welcome to the family”, and Sally had framed a picture of the two of

them for Lucy to hang in her room. Sally’s mum had printed a copy of their family tree and added Lucy’s name to it, which Lucy thought was great.

After three months, Lucy still talks about the party and treasures the gifts that she received that day to welcome her into her new family.

Celebrating achievements

In *The Secret of Happy Children*, Stephen Biddulph tells us that a child’s mind is full of questions. The greatest questions are:

- who am I?
- what kind of person am I?
- where do I fit in?

“These are questions of identity”, Biddulph argues, “questions that shape our lives as adults. Children are deeply affected by statements beginning with You are... Whether the message is *You are so lazy!* or *You’re a great kid!* these statements from the important ‘big people’ will go deeply and firmly into the child’s consciousness.”

It’s not just families that can struggle to tell each other what they like and value about one another; it doesn’t happen easily or readily in organisations or schools either. Simon and Teresa helped their local school to begin to change a small part of this: the way information is shared at parents’ evenings.

Simon and Teresa have two daughters, Elizabeth and Kate, who both attend the same primary school. When parents’ evenings came around, they took it in turns to meet the teacher. Teresa went to meet Kate’s teacher, Miss Keating.

Afterwards, Simon and Teresa talked about the parents’ evening, and Teresa showed Simon the orange slip with Kate’s targets on it. Simon was shocked to hear that Miss Keating had not said anything positive about Kate as a person or about her school work.

Simon had a good relationship with the head teacher, Mr. Field, so next day, after the school run, he called in to see him and expressed his dismay at what had happened the night before. They talked about how this could, and should, have been different, and how they might ensure that appreciations were as much a part of parents’ evenings as targets.

That evening, Simon and Teresa created a new kind of feedback form for parents. These new forms had a photo of the child, space for three appreciations and, beneath that, space for three targets. They tried it out with Kate, putting her school photo on it, targets and three things that they appreciated about her.

Mr. Field was impressed and the new form is now being used as part of staff training and at parents’ evenings for all children. **SEN**

Further Information

Helen Sanderson has worked as a government advisor on person centred approaches and is co-author of *Celebrating Families: simple, practical ways to enhance family life*.

www.celebratingfamilies.co.uk