Teaching kids to be allies for disability inclusion

By **Sally Lindsay** University of Toronto
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Social inclusion is a key social determinant of health. Without it, people are more susceptible to anxiety, depression and poor health outcomes. Young people with disabilities often experience the consequences of stigma, but we can all play a part in changing that — even our kids.

There are at least 400,000 children and young adults up to the age of 24 with disabilities in Canada.

More than half of children with a disability have either one close friend or no close friends at all.

At Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital (Holland Bloorview) where I work as a senior scientist, our *Dear Everybody* campaign is raising awareness of the stigma kids and young adults with disabilities face. At my academic home, the University of Toronto's faculty of medicine, a campaign called We All Belong calls upon the community to nurture an environment where people of all races, genders, sexual orientations and abilities feel welcomed and respected.

More than half of children with a disability have either no close friends at all, or only one. Young people with disabilities are two to three times more likely to be bullied than their peers without disabilities.

I lead the Transitions and Inclusive environments Lab (TRAIL) at Holland Bloorview's research institute (the Bloorview Research Institute) where we develop programs and interventions to help foster welcoming and supportive environments for kids and youth at school, work and in the community. We're especially interested in how young people transition between environments and from childhood into adulthood.

Earlier this year, we published a study involving young people with and without disabilities to outline a model for developing what is called disability confidence, the ability to include and work with a person with a disability. We identified four stages that led to the growth of this kind of confidence.

The continuum often starts with some discomfort, then moves into people reaching beyond their comfort zone to begin to understand and minimize differences between themselves and someone with a disability. This can lead to broadened perspectives and, ultimately, disability confidence — empathy, comfort and understanding the abilities of people with a disability.

Right now, much of my work focuses on improving inclusion and employment opportunities for young people with disabilities because their job rates are significantly lower than their peers who don't have disabilities.

But inclusion starts early: **kids can play a big role in helping their peers with disabilities feel welcome and valued.**

An important first step is to encourage your child to get to know people with disabilities — they're regular people just like everyone else. This can help eliminate stigma by opening the door for kids to learn what they have in common with their peers and to consider their perspectives.

It's also a good idea to teach kids to be mindful of how they speak about disability, and to role model respectful language ourselves. Consider person-first wording — instead of saying "disabled person", use "person with a disability." It's just one part of a person's identity, and doesn't define them.

Further, language like "suffers from" or "confined to a wheelchair" implies people with disabilities have less value than others. Ableist language like this feeds into the misconception that it isn't "normal" to have a disability and contributes to stigma. Instead, use "has a disability" or "uses a wheelchair." We shouldn't view disability as being either tragic or inspirational.

Talk to your kids about the fact that although not all people are the same, we can celebrate our differences and find the things we have in common with others who have a disability. Talk to your child about how they can include friends with disabilities in a game — for example, maybe there's a way to make it easier for a kid in a wheelchair to participate.

For younger kids, this could mean including a peer with a disability in a game or inviting them to a birthday party.

For teens and young adults, share the message that young people with disabilities belong in the community, in the classroom and workplace and have valuable skills to contribute. Encourage youth to invite their peers with disabilities to participate in social and community activities.

With a bit of guidance, your child could play an important role in making change — helping break down barriers for kids with disabilities, from childhood and beyond.

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