

## Special Kids, Regular Lives

Last week I was reminded once again of something I already knew: Children with special needs are, mostly, just children.

At a local restaurant, a family at the next table was celebrating a birthday. I recognized them when I noticed their six-year-old son. Caleb has Down Syndrome; I knew him when he was younger and in Baby TALK's early intervention program.

I turned to his sweet mother to ask how he was doing. To be honest, I expected to hear about his therapies and special education program.

Instead, she replied with a smile, "He is so ornery!" And I could see by the good-natured teasing between Caleb and his grandpa that she was right.

Thanks, Mom, for reminding me. Thanks for jarring me out of my focus on the one way Caleb is different, and bringing me back to the many ways he is just like every other child.

Each time a child is born or identified with developmental challenges, there is a grieving process for families. That grief continues with each missed "milestone:" the one-year-old who doesn't walk, the five-year-old who doesn't start kindergarten, the sixteen-year-old who doesn't get his driver's license.

But there is also joy for families of children with special needs. These children are, after all, children first. For the most part, these children provide their parents with the same pleasures and pains that more typical children present.

Children with autism lose their baby teeth. Children with Down Syndrome get their feelings hurt. Children with cerebral palsy talk back to their parents, and children who are hearing-impaired want to know where babies come from.

Parents of children with special needs deal with regular sleeping, feeding, and discipline issues in addition to therapies. These parents get tired, get frustrated, make tough decisions, and feel guilty (maybe more than most).

They also laugh out loud at their children's funny antics, kiss their soft heads at bedtime, and ache with love as they hold them close.

If you know a child with special needs, it would mean the world to her family if you would invite her to play. Her parents can explain any adaptive equipment or care methods to you, and your child will learn a great deal about accepting others who may be different.

Let her parents talk to you about the regular events of their lives. Try to get past your own pity so that this child can be, for you, just one more fascinating human being.

If you are the parent of a child with special needs, forgive the rest of us when we are incompetent in supporting you. Help us learn about your child. Tell us about your lives together.

Maybe your son or daughter can help us learn that special kids lead regular lives.