

# SPIDERMAN, STAR WARS, AND DISABILITY

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow  
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Our family loves movies! We saw *Spiderman* and *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* on the first day each was released, standing in long lines with other devotees. When we pause and reflect, many movies offer important themes and lessons that can be relevant to the lives of people with disabilities.

Consider Spiderman, the person. This is a guy who essentially “acquires” differences after being bitten by a spider: his wrists exude filaments that can become webs; his fingertips grow sticky pods; his eyes, feet, and legs work very differently than everyone else’s; and he can assume amazing physical positions. Hmmmm—I don’t know any people with disabilities whose wrists can manufacture spider web material or who grow sticky pods on their fingertips, but I *do* know many who have eyes, feet, and legs that operate differently and whose bodies can assume amazing positions.

So Spiderman has unique differences and many people with disabilities have unique differences. In general, Spiderman is a valued member of society (criminals don’t like him, though). In general, people with disabilities are *not* seen as valuable members of society. Spiderman is valued because of what he does (helping others); *his differences are irrelevant*.

Can we learn something from Spiderman and his differences? Can we learn to value what people

with disabilities do well (whether that’s having skill at a job, being a good friend, helping others, playing on the computer, or anything else) and see the person’s differences as *irrelevant*?

If Spiderman could be compared to a person with “acquired differences,” some *Star Wars* characters could be thought of as being “born” with differences. Many don’t look “human”—like the blue creature who gets around by flapping the short wings on his back—but they’re still contributing, participating members of the community-at-large.

I recall the “bar scene” in the very first *Star Wars* (many, many years ago). A diverse collection of living, breathing humans, creatures, and other personas who all “created community” during happy hour. Commonalities brought them together; differences were *unimportant*.

Historically, filmmakers have portrayed people with differences or disabilities at the extremes of stereotypes: evil, bad guys (like Captain Hook, Frankenstein, etc.) or pitiful heroes (like Tiny Tim, Rainman, etc.). In *Star Wars*, George Lucas celebrates differences, and simultaneously demonstrates the duality (good and bad) inherent in each of us.

What can we learn from *Star Wars*? Can we begin to recognize the *unimportance* of a person’s physical appearance? By conventional standards, Yoda is extremely old, very short, has big ears, and talks funny. But he’s the wisest of the wise. (And he’s always been my favorite *Star Wars* character!) Can *we* find ways to replicate the spirit of community and include people with differences? Is it possible for us to mentor one another (as Obi Wan-Kenobi does) and acquire the power of *The Force*?

Each of us can interpret the meaning of *The Force* in our own way. Those of us who want to ensure people with disabilities live Real Lives can interpret *The Force* as the power of inclusion.

May *The Force* be with you!