

Consequences of Segregation

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

What are the consequences of segregation? Segregation can certainly harm children with disabilities (per other articles described later). But it can also cause negative consequences for children and adults without disabilities and our society-at-large.

Experiences during our recent family vacation provide a good illustration. We headed off for a two-week driving trip to visit presidential museums (a passion of our son, Benjamin) in different cities, then on to museums and memorial sites in Washington, DC. All was well: great weather and light crowds at presidential museums in May.

Things changed, however, when we arrived in DC. The weather was still great, but huge crowds were everywhere, composed primarily of middle-school tour groups, herded here-and-there by their teachers/chaperones. Making our way was sometimes difficult, as Benjamin carefully maneuvered his power wheelchair through the crowds. We could handle that. What was more difficult to deal with was the behavior of thousands of middle-school students and their teachers.

Most stared bug-eyed at Benjamin, and some whispered to each other as he passed by. Many displayed exaggerated responses as Benjamin tried to get from here to there: some students gave him an extremely wide berth (urged on by loud exhortations from their teachers) and made a “big deal” of moving out of the way, as if Benj had a communicable disease. Others did the opposite—barely moving aside—despite Benj’s numerous and polite requests to, “Excuse me, please.”

At one museum, visitors were instructed to take a large glass elevator to the top (sixth) floor, visit that floor’s exhibits, then proceed down to the next floor using the two sets of stairs on each floor. We were told to use one of the two elevators, which were marked as being *only* for people with disabilities and/or people pushing children in strollers.

Piece of cake, we thought. But no, the designated elevators were routinely full of middle-school

students—none of whom had a disability or pushed a stroller! After waiting and waiting, we bit the bullet and entered an elevator that was only half-full. The students and their teacher had to squeeze together so we’d all fit; staring and an uncomfortable silence followed. I asked the 30-something teacher (she’s in charge, right?) if she was aware of the signage regarding the use of the elevators. She gave me a blank look and said, “No.” Her students’ faces had similar blank looks. I politely told her what the signs said; she had no response and looked away. (We then complained to a museum staffer who said the staff would monitor the elevator usage.)

Why did the students—and *their teachers*—behave the way they did? I don’t believe they were inherently mean-spirited. I *do* believe they were ignorant and prejudiced. Prejudice—prejudging someone—is usually rooted in ignorance, and this ignorance is probably caused by a lack of personal contact with—or *even basic awareness of*—people with disabilities. This, in turn, seems to be a consequence of the segregation of students with disabilities in “special” separate environments in public schools, houses of worship, and/or social-recreational activities. Despite all the progress in laws that prohibit disability-based discrimination, too many people with disabilities remain invisible to society-at-large.

On our trip, we saw thousands of students in their tour groups, but did not see one who had an apparent disability. Thus, it seems the students did not attend schools where children with and without disabilities were together in general ed classrooms. If those students—and *their teachers*—had friendships and/or familiarity with children with disabilities, the students and their teachers probably wouldn’t have behaved the way they did toward my son.

When children *with* disabilities are *excluded* from participation in ordinary environments, children *without* disabilities have no opportunities to get to

The world of education is like an island where people, cut off from the world, are prepared for life by exclusion from it.

Maria Montessori

2—Consequences of Segregation

know them, to see them as their peers/equals, and/or to see beyond the disability. Thus, they're ignorant that children with disabilities are children, first, and are more like them than different.

Worse, however, are the attitudes and perceptions children without disabilities may acquire based on their awareness that children with disabilities are in the “retard room” (this is what many students call it) or other segregated setting. This awareness can breed negative attitudes, such as children with disabilities being perceived as “other,” they're not “like us,” they don't belong, they're “less than,” and more. In the 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* that outlawed racial segregation, Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote that segregation is “usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the [segregated] group.” If children without disabilities grow up with only negative perceptions of children with disabilities, most will likely grow into adults whose perceptions remain the same, unless or until they have positive personal experiences with children/adults with disabilities.

Let's think long-term. Children with and without disabilities become adults. When they grow up together—*not separated*—in schools, worship services, social/recreational activities, etc., they learn from and about each other, and develop relationships. What might happen when those children are adults? If a child *without* a disability grows up to become a general ed teacher, she most likely wouldn't automatically turn away a student with a disability from her classroom. If a child *without* a disability grows up to become the human resources manager at a large company, he probably wouldn't routinely assume a job applicant with a disability couldn't do the job. The teacher and the HR manager would remember the children they grew up with; they would have learned from their friends with disabilities that having a disability is not a barrier to success; that disability is “no big deal.” Finally, some of those children *without* disabilities will

one day become *parents* of children with disabilities. Isn't it probable their attitudes about their own children may be different than the attitudes of parents who did not have positive experiences with children with disabilities during their childhoods? Can you think of other examples that might be possible?

When my children were growing up, parents of my son's classmates at their inclusive school routinely told me they were so glad our children were friends. They also shared that the inclusive school and our children's friendships had a positive impact on the lives of their children and their families.

Inclusion can generate positive outcomes for everyone. Segregation can generate negative consequences for everyone, and these can continue from one generation to the next. The uncomfortable experiences during our trip, as described in this article—and similar experiences of other families and people with disabilities—represent the tip of the iceberg and are all too common.

Parents, teachers, service providers, or others may believe in the value of a child/adult with a disability being in a “special” (segregated) environment. But we must also be aware of—and take responsibility for—the negative consequences, both short- and long-term, generated by segregation.

Segregation—excluding children and adults with disabilities from the mainstream—sets up an “us/them” mentality and also reinforces negative, stereotypical, and erroneous perceptions about individuals with disabilities. Perceptions and attitudes are intertwined, and our attitudes drive our actions. Thus, negative attitudes result in negative behaviors: stares, whispers, rudeness, pity, and more.

Inclusion is the right thing to do, morally and ethically. It can also reverse the negative outcomes of segregation and change the fabric of our society. How did we ever come to believe that people with disabilities are “them”? As adults, do we not have a moral responsibility to eliminate the negative consequences that segregation inflicts on all children?

(See also the following articles at www.disabilityisnatural.com: *A Call to Action*; *Inclusion: The Natural State*; *The Moral Imperative of Inclusion*; *Lessons of Segregation*; *Which Should Be Defended: Inclusion or Segregation?*)

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