



Making A Difference At The

By Lori Mitchell

Start, And All Through The School Year

I'm finding that more and more teachers have questions about how to integrate a special needs child into the class socially. Some parents think the teacher will handle the introduction, but it's a mandate in most school districts that the teacher can not talk about the child's disability unless they get the okay from the parents first. So days, even weeks can go by and the child doesn't get the help they need. It's been my experience that the sooner the child is properly introduced into the class, the sooner they are understood and accepted. If it's left, even for a day, teasing and misunderstandings may prevail.

There are as many different ways to introduce a special needs student into the class as there are students, but the process begins with a conversation between the teacher, the parents and the child. The teacher may have wonderful ideas and experience or s/he may want ideas from the parents. Honesty seems to work the best, no matter what approach you use.

In our family, kindergarten was slowly approaching and my husband and I agonized over what to do for our daughter April, who has vitiligo (the loss of color in the skin). It looks like white clouds going across her skin. On orientation day there were kids and parents pointing and whispering, so we knew there would be questions at school. I didn't know that I could talk to April's teacher. I thought she had enough going on and we should just handle this ourselves.

We decided we couldn't bring April up in front of her new classmates to point out how different she was, as she has always been very shy and never wanted much attention drawn to her. We thought about having her go out of the room while we talked about her condition, but that seemed wrong. We felt it would send the message that she was ashamed of her condition, or that it had to be a secret. So what were we to do?

On the first day of school we dressed April in her fancy "first



April and a friend at summer camp.

day of school" tights and a long sleeve shirt to cover the most noticeable part of her vitiligo. We typed up a note as if April was writing it that told all about what vitiligo was, and wasn't. There was a picture of April and her signature. It not only told about April's skin, but it also told about her pet cat and a few of her hobbies and favorite foods. This way it wasn't just about her disease, it also introduced April as a child and friend. We sent it home for the parents to read to their children. The next day April wore her usual shorts and T-shirt. There were a few friendly questions but from then on she was just another kid in class.

Once I had a chance to talk with her teacher I realized she wanted to be involved and welcomed the opportunity to help in any way she could. She did a very simple thing that made a big difference, by putting her arm around April and showing the kids that it was okay to touch her. We were kept informed of any comments

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A Few Ideas From Our Own Experience

From April:

What to do about teasing

I have been called all sorts of names. I thought they were mean, but I usually just say I have two colors of skin and I was born this way. Most of the time, if kids know more about whatever you have, they will leave you alone.

From Mom:

1. Get off to a good start

I knew April would be starting kindergarten soon and wouldn't know anyone at the school, so I put an ad in the small local paper about the new playgroup that was starting for all pre-kindergarten age kids that would be going to her school.

2. Teachers can make a big difference

In first grade, April's teacher invited her to help set up the classroom about a week before school started. In third grade, April's teacher would talk about diversity and acceptance on a regular basis, and asked students on the playground to find someone that wasn't playing with anyone and play with them.

In fourth grade, I didn't think I needed to talk to April's teacher. A few weeks into the school year April came home and told me two boys had been calling her and her friend bad names. I realized I needed to make sure that her teacher knew I wanted to be informed of anything like this. I also brought my book around to several classes to talk about differences and how we are all alike in so many ways.

3. What to do if your child is tired of explaining

April came up with the idea of handing out cards explaining her vitiligo. They had the American Vitiligo Research Foundation web site on them and she

put "I'm just like you, I just have two colors of skin" plus some of the other stuff about not being contagious, and April decorated them herself. They were a big hit, and I think that made her feel like she had a little more control over the situation. April still carries the cards in her backpack just in case she ever needs one.

4. Role play

April and I talk about what to say if someone asks about her vitiligo, and act out how to respond. We get pretty silly sometimes and try to keep it light, not too serious. It just gives her a chance to practice how to respond with a truthful, simple answer.

5. Let your child figure out what to do

April usually tells me if anyone has said anything about her vitiligo and I try to just listen. I try to let her figure out what she wants to do about it. I think that



helps her to feel like she has more control. If she asks for ideas, of course I try to suggest something, but I try to let her go through a list of her own ideas first.

6. Change the subject

Sometimes when people ask about April's vitiligo she will answer but I can see she wants to change the subject. Now that April has pen pals (on the internet) with vitiligo from all over the world, it gives her an easy segue into talking about how cool it is to know all these kids from other countries. She can turn the conversation around so she's talking about something positive that has come out of having this disease.

7. Bring baby pictures

My friend's daughter, Kimbi, has Neurodegeneration with Brain Iron Accumulation, or NBIA, a rare progressive neurological condition. She can no longer speak and is in a wheelchair. At the beginning of the school year while in elementary and middle school, her mom visited her classes and talked about Kimbi's condition. She also brought pictures of when she was little and still walking. Once the other kids see that Kimbi was just like them at one time, they can relate to her better.

8. Help children put themselves in another child's shoes

I was invited to Brachial Plexus Awareness day at a San Diego Elementary school. Anthony, a third grader, had brachial plexus. In Anthony's case, this meant he couldn't use his right arm. His mother came into the class and helped the teacher put ace bandages on all the students so they would be reminded not to use their right arm for the day.

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made to her throughout the year and I still keep in close contact with her teachers every year, though as April has gotten older she has become more comfortable answering questions about vitiligo on her own.

In contrast, there was an 11-year-old boy with vitiligo that decided to keep his skin covered and try to keep it a secret. As it started to spread, other students noticed it and didn't know what it was. They started to assume it must be something bad, because he wouldn't tell anyone what it was. He was soon harassed so severely

that he had to change schools. At the new school his family decided to talk about his vitiligo on the very first day. He was accepted and made friends easily.

Not too long ago teachers were told not to talk about the child's difference. They were to tell the other kids not to whisper, laugh or make fun of the special needs student, but that was it. Stephen, a friend of mine who has autism, didn't even know what autism was until he was in ninth grade because no one talked about his condition. In middle school and high school, his mom would go talk to the class

while he was out of the room. He says with what he knows now he may have answered questions himself. He now attends San Diego State University and speaks about autism and how teachers can help children with autism in their classes.

As a parent or teacher it is important to remember that some children will be more outgoing while others may want to hang back a bit. If you're the teacher, talk to the parents and child and ask what that child would prefer. Give them a few ideas on how to talk to the other kids.

If the student is up to it, the best approach

is for them to get up and talk about their own condition. It shows that there's nothing to be ashamed of and there are no secrets. Most of the time the others kids in class just want to know more about the condition, and once they do, they feel more comfortable and know what to expect. Having a day where all the students get a few minutes to tell something about themselves may prevent a child from feeling singled out.

If the child doesn't want to say anything about their condition, don't force them. If a child can't speak for themselves, you can always talk to the class about differences in a general way, without pointing anyone out. Try to keep a dialogue going throughout the year about acceptance.

Discussions on diversity help all the students. While observing in my child's third grade classroom, I heard students share personal stories about family members that have a disability and they asked questions to help them understand how to deal with different situations. For many students, this was their first opportunity to share this information. I also heard students make connections with their own struggles in order to understand and make sense of what it may be like to feel different. Every child in class has felt different at one time in their life and it's usually a great relief for them to know they aren't the only one.

As a parent, if you have the time, you may want to offer to lead a discussion on diversity once or twice a month. Even if your child's teacher only has 15 or 20 minutes, twice a month, it's worth the time. I recommend the following two books because they have constructive ideas that you can take right to class and use.

The first is my book, *Different Just Like Me*. It talks about how we are all different yet so much alike. There's a five-day lesson plan and activities at my website (<http://www.differentjustlikeme.cc>) to reinforce these ideas. There are also games and coloring book pages. The book is recommended for kindergarten through third grade, but the lessons and activities have been used in classes all the way up to 10th grade. It has proven to be very popular

among teachers, and part of my profits from the book go towards vitiligo research.

There's another book that helps to get conversations going about acceptance. It's called *Activities in the Classroom: Connecting Students*, by Leah Katz, Caren Sax and Douglas Fisher. You can find it

through the PEAK Parent Center, Inc. website (<http://www.peakparent.org>) or by calling 1(800) 284-0251. The book offers 1 activities designed to build acceptance. It really is a "must have" book!

Guest speakers on diversity can also b

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April's Discoveries

April has a web page at <http://www.avrf.org>, at the "Children's Corner". Here, she shares a bit of her experience with other kids that have vitiligo:

I have made a few discoveries while living with vitiligo. One is that I'm not the only one in the world that is different. Every kid in my class has something that makes them different. I think I used to wonder why I was the only one that had to be different, but now, when I really take a look at everyone around me, I can see that no one is perfect.

The second thing I figured out was that, so far, there's nothing I can do about my vitiligo. The only choice I have is how I deal with it. I can be really angry and bothered by it or I can choose to make the best of it and accept that this is the way it is. I'm going to have vitiligo whether I'm happy about it or not. Why not choose to be okay with it and focus on the good stuff in my life? If someone teases me, I'm not going to let him ruin my day. Some person I don't even know cannot decide what I think of myself. I have lots of friends and family members that love me just the way I am, and they count much more than some rude goof ball.

Another discovery is that I am more than just my vitiligo. I'm talking about it a lot now because that's what this is about, but normally I don't really talk about it or think about it all day. I have lots of other things to think about, like my cat, drawing, singing, playing piano, my friends, swimming, homework and shopping.

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helpful. I contacted a nearby Braille institute and found Jeannie, a woman with a guide dog. She came out to my daughter's class and let the kids pet her guide dog,

Snuffer. After Jeannie had talked a bit about her story, she took questions. There were two students that had trouble with their eyes, but had never really talked about it. They both felt comfortable

enough to tell a little about their own story. All the students listened and I think the whole class became a little closer that day.

Something as simple as a first introduction can set the tone for the whole school year. Parents, teachers and students can work together to make it a positive experience for everyone. We don't need to hide our differences anymore. The more we all learn about each other, the better we can understand and accept one another. **EP**

*Lori Mitchell wrote and illustrated the children's book *Different Just Like Me*. She graduated with honors from Art Center College of Design, in Pasadena, California. She lives in San Diego, California with her husband Dean and their daughter April.*

If you have had a positive experience around school inclusion, or know of any good children's books about diversity, please e-mail her at lori@differentjustlikeme.cc