

Senior Division, Nonfiction

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All the Things I Didn't Know, And Wouldn't Have Believed Anyway (an excerpt)

I did not know all those years ago that being included isn't enough. All the years of signing up for lessons and events simply because we could. Paying enrolment fees for classes where no one ever really took the time to offer instruction, never really looked to nurture talent, but instead patted themselves on the back simply for "including". I didn't know then that language around accessibility is easy to speak, but takes real work and commitment to actually enact.

It took me years to see the difference between inclusion and belonging. I don't think I would know the difference yet if I hadn't experienced it for myself. But we all know the feeling of a good fit, of being amongst peers, of genuine smiles versus knowing grins. The stark contrast between being welcomed as an equal as opposed to being permitted access is palpable. Inclusion has a power imbalance. Someone does the including, someone is included. Belonging doesn't feel like that. It just feels right.

I didn't know that my child would grow up.

That sounds ridiculous, but it is true. Many parents of disabled children have to realize that their disabled children will one day grow into disabled adults. I had to learn that there are many types of adults in this world, and that having needs makes you no less of one. You still deserve the same level of dignity and respect awarded to anyone else. Developmentally and intellectually disabled adults are not children in adult bodies. They are adults.

I did not know that love really is enough. That it's the basis of everything. That it's okay to meet your child where they are, and to love them right where they are. And that absolutely nothing else can be built without that vital foundation. It's easy to be intimidated by timelines and should-be-by-nows. It's easy to let these worries tower over you and push you to push your child unrealistically. Instead, time teaches us skills and practices come when the child is ready, on their trajectory, not ours. That never is a falsehood. That we never stop being amazed by our children. And that soaking up the wonder of them, cheering them on, loving without limits, is the best therapy of all.