

Dear Parents,

Gesher is a program in which we relate to children as unique individuals who should be given opportunities to learn new things, experience new challenges and develop new skills (both physical and social), while feeling good about themselves. We created Gesher to be an inclusive program in which children with different needs are welcomed. It has been brought to our attention that many families have been struggling with how to discuss special needs and individual differences with your children. This letter will hopefully give you some ideas as to how to discuss such a sensitive topic.

Inclusive education happens when children with and without disabilities participate and learn together in the same setting. For a long time children with disabilities were kept separate from typically developing children. People got used to the idea that special education meant separate education. Research now shows that when children are educated together positive academic and social outcomes occur for all children involved.

Typical peers benefit from participation in an inclusive program by developing a heightened awareness of the needs of children with disabilities. This can lead to greater sensitivity toward others and acceptance of the relative strengths and weaknesses that we all have. Many parents acknowledge these benefits of inclusive programming.

Disabilities cover a wide range, some are obvious, such as a physical disability (e.g., a child whom uses a wheelchair) and some are less obvious, or hidden, such as a learning disability. Speaking with your children can often be difficult for many parents.

Here are some tips:

- ❖ Tell them that **there are lots of types of people in this world:**
 - Some kids talk in their own special way. Some kids cannot speak many words, but they have other ways of communicating; they may use their hands to get your attention, or their eyes.
 - Some kids act in certain ways because it makes them feel comfortable; this may look like a child being very handsy or they may jump lightly up and down or flap their hands.
- ❖ **People are similar to each other, while at the same time different.** Ask your child, in what way they are similar to child X and in what way they are different to the same child. Child X could be a good friend, or a child with special needs.
- ❖ **Being different does not mean it is less good.** People have different talents in different areas. If we were all the same, the world would have been boring.
- ❖ **Encourage them to think:** what can they do to make someone feel more welcomed and accepted? What would they want the classroom to do for them to make themselves feel most welcomed?

- We have found the following link helpful with answering some of the children's questions.

http://www.babycenter.com/0_how-to-talk-to-your-child-about-disabilities_3657045.bc?page=2

Please encourage your child to continue to ask you, teachers, or Gesher's St. John Fisher Mental Health Counseling interns questions about children they may not feel comfortable with or don't understand. Celebrating individual differences are very important in our community. Each individual we encounter is an added value and these differences help us find the better "me" in each of us. We encourage individual differences at Gesher and love getting to know each child for who they are.

Sincerely,

Gesher Staff