

Autonomy, Inclusion, and the Power of Possibility

DEC at the Intersection

I imagine if you required someone to help you take a bite of food or go to the bathroom.

Imagine if you needed help to move about in the world.

Imagine if you needed someone to help you communicate.

Imagine if you always needed someone to help you understand concepts and ideas that come easily and naturally to everyone else.

Believe it or not, needing help does not always feel great. It doesn't feel good to be dependent on others. Yet most people without a disability take that independence for granted. We don't always think about early childhood special education (ECSE) as a system for building autonomy and independence for young children, but as a person with a disability myself, I can attest that it should be the highest priority.

I was born with a rare orthopedic impairment called *Spondylometaphyseal dysplasia* or SMD. It is a rare form of dwarfism, and I stand at four feet four inches tall. I am a "little person," which is the preferred term for many people in the United States who have the medical condition of dwarfism.

Many months of my childhood were spent in recovery mode from more than 20 orthopedic surgeries.

Throughout childhood, I went through long periods of being dependent on others out of necessity.

I wanted so much to be independent, during those times, and throughout childhood.

This need for independence starts very early. In the 1950s, Erik Erikson studied psychosocial development and found that a critical task during early childhood was to develop a sense of autonomy (Erikson, 1950). It's a time when we are learning about gaining independence and control over ourselves and our environment. Children begin to assert their will, making simple choices like what to eat or wear, and learning self-help and life skills.

According to Erikson, if children do not develop autonomy, they will have lifelong struggles with shame and doubt. If children are overprotected or held back from testing their own capacities, they may become worried about their own ability to function independently. Children need opportunities to explore the capacities of their own brains and bodies. Yet our current system educates children in separate settings, more often than not.

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Memories of Independence and Dependence

When I was in preschool, I had been out of school for a couple of months for surgery and recovery. The recovery involved a full body cast, and I was unable to walk, stand, or even sit up in a chair. A time of major dependence!

Being away from school for multiple weeks seemed like a very long time to me as a child. My teacher reached out and asked whether my mother might be able to bring me to school to celebrate Valentine's Day with the class. My mom thought it was a great idea because she knew how much I missed my friends and how much I loved Valentine's Day. I loved the candy hearts and cupcakes with pink frosting. I loved the little foldable cards sealed with a sticker or lollipop. I loved the mailboxes that we used to make. We would trade valentines with everyone in the class, and everyone decorated a mailbox for their cards. I loved it all.



I remember feeling nervous about going into the classroom after what felt like such a long time. Because of the cast, my mother had to carry me around everywhere. As you might imagine, I worried about what would happen when my friends saw me. Would they stare at me? Would they even remember me? But my mother felt that it was important for me to reconnect with my friends at school. She and my teacher assured me that it would be fine. And you know what? It was fine. It was better than fine, because not only did I have my own Valentine's Day mailbox, but everyone had made me a valentine. While this is not really a story of the common definition of inclusion, it is a story about a time when I felt included. It is a story about membership. It is a story about belonging. It is a story about supporting a child to build friendships and connect with her peers. To maintain some semblance of normalcy in a very unusual time of dependence.

Supporting Autonomy With Inclusion

Throughout my years in school, my parents always expected inclusion. They did not see my disability as a reason to lower expectations; they assumed I was part of every community I joined. I was included in general education, except for gym class. During gym, I did homework in the coach's office.

No one called it segregation. It was framed as safety, practicality, even kindness: I could get a head start on homework, and no gym clothes needed! But the message was unmistakable. The place for my body during movement and play—the heart of childhood community—was a small room off to the side. Other

children's bodies belonged on the court, the field, the track. My body belonged behind a desk.

I can't recall a single conversation in which anyone asked, "What would it take for you to participate?" The assumption was that my body was the problem and that the solution was removal, not redesign. Over time, that quiet daily removal did something deep: it taught me that I was not an active person, that my body was fundamentally not built for physical activity, that trying what other kids did would be unrealistic at best and dangerous at worst.

This is what segregation does. It rarely arrives with a villain's monologue. It shows up as a series of "practical" decisions that accumulate into an identity: you are the child who sits out, the child who helps in the office, the child for whom participation is always "too much." A 3-year-old who moves differently, communicates differently, interacts differently with peers, or needs medical support is routed into a separate classroom or building while children of their age attend neighborhood preschools and community programs. Families are told this is where "services" are. And just like my hours in the coach's office, those decisions seep into a child's sense of what they can or cannot do.

When we exclude kids, even for "their own good" or "their own comfort," we are teaching them a devastating lesson: *You don't belong here. Your presence is a complication we aren't equipped to handle.* They are told, day after day, that their needs are so "special" they require a separate room and a separate teacher. They take on the understanding that they are not "abled" enough to be with their peers. Children then carry this internal narrative into

adulthood, even after learning challenges have resolved.

We often talk about inclusion in terms of access to curriculum, but for very young children, the deeper issue is access to identity. Who am I, if every day I see that other children's bodies and brains belong in the shared spaces of school, while mine must be managed elsewhere?

Internalizing the Limits of Your Own Body

The long-term impact of those early separations is not always visible in test scores, but it shows up in the stories we tell ourselves about what we can and cannot do. For me, years of sitting on the sidelines turned into a quiet but firm conviction: I am not someone who does physical things. I'm the one who watches, who helps, who stays safe. It became a one of my first stories.

But as an adult, I see the cost of that "safety." Those years of being tucked away in the coach's office imprinted a profound lack of confidence in my body. I still struggle with balance and navigating stairs today—not just because of my physical condition, but because I didn't take the chance to explore what my body *could* do. To fail, fall, and get back up again.

That story followed me into adulthood. When I thought about physical activity my imagination filled instantly with failure. My childhood had trained me to expect my body to be a liability in motion. It took a very different kind of message to interrupt that. As an adult, when I went mountain bike riding with my husband, I told him that I kept imagining myself crashing. I was narrating the ride in my head: this is going to end badly; you're going to



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crash. My husband listened and then said something simple but radical: “Don’t imagine that. Imagine you are blazing down the hill like a boss.”

That one sentence did not erase years of internalized ableism, but it exposed it. I realized that my fear was not just about the mechanics of riding a bike; it was about decades of being positioned as the person whose role was to stay safe while others learned to experiment. His invitation—to imagine myself as competent, powerful, and in motion—was novel.

How Self-Contained Classrooms Shrink Children’s Worlds

We are all just human beings living in a body we did not choose, navigating a world that wasn’t always built for us. No one is 100% “abled.” We all need help sometimes,

and we all have something beautiful to offer. When we segregate a child early, we set the boundaries before they even get a chance to try. This is especially damaging for a very young child who is still developing a sense of self and mastery. In preschool, children don’t know what they’re capable of because they’re busy testing the world to find out. Rather than fostering autonomy and independence, we exclude children at a time of great unknowns. Early childhood inclusion is a rebellion against that tendency. Inclusive classrooms are open to the possibilities, recognizing that much of what children can or cannot do is largely negotiable.

In practical terms, this means:

- We start from the assumption that every preschooler belongs in a shared classroom community.
- We design environments, routines, and roles so a wide range of bodies, brains, behaviors, and communication styles can participate in meaningful ways—on the rug, at the sensory table, on the playground.
- We treat specialized services (ECSE teachers, therapists, assistive technology, paraprofessionals) as autonomy-building supports that join the child in their community, not a reason to pull them out of it.

This also means looking critically at the structures we have inherited:

- Asking whether self-contained ECSE programs exist primarily because we have not

- invested enough in inclusive design, staffing, and coaching.
- Listening to adults who grew up in segregated or pseudoinclusive settings and taking seriously the long-term impact on identity and self-efficacy.
 - Training all early childhood educators—not just specialists—in universal design, collaborative teaming, and the social model of disability, so that inclusion is seen as core practice.

Moving From “Managing Risk” to “Imagining Possibility”

Early childhood educators and specialists are the primary architects of a child’s earliest self-image. You are the ones who decide whether a child learns to view themselves with competence and confidence or whether they develop doubt about themselves that they will carry for the rest of their lives. Children will rarely imagine themselves blazing through obstacles if the adults around them never suggest it is possible.

The children in our early childhood programs today are forming their first stories right now. They’re deciding whether they are the kind of person who tries things,

who climbs a little higher, who gets back up after slipping—or the kind of person who sits on the sidelines. As someone who spent years assuming my body was not made for movement, I want different first stories for today’s preschoolers. I want the child with a walker to be part of the line heading out to the playground, with adults who have already thought about how to make it work. I want the child who uses assistive communication technology to be at the art table, with peers and teachers who know how to wait for their message. I want the child with big sensory needs to have a safe way to move and regulate in the classroom, not be moved out of it.

My husband’s comment about bike riding is an example of the shift we need. Inclusion will always be messier than segregation, because real community is messy. There will be days when plans fail, when behaviors escalate, when activities need to be rethought. But the alternative—a system that quietly teaches some of our youngest children that their place is in the segregated space—comes with a cost we rarely name.

Together we can open up the possibilities for young children with disabilities as they develop autonomy, competence, and confidence. We can all work together to provide services in community settings so children hear the message loud and clear: Imagine you are blazing down the hill . . . like a boss.

Author’s Note

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Reference

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