

LEARNING FROM CHILDREN WITH CHALLENGES

BOOKBAG

By Mary Anne Duggan



Aunt Ginny had a passion for Frank Sinatra, guitar playing, singing and, when allowed, Jack Daniels. She had a full-body laugh that electrified a room. Her spiritual beliefs ran deep and her faith in God made even the most devout appear dubious.

She'd spend hours scribbling on a note pad and, when she finished, feel as if she had written the great American novel. Aunt Ginny always said she worked at a "nuts and bolts" factory. She also did a stint "licking envelopes." Ginny loved being busy and, above all, being helpful. I will always

remember her holding my newborn daughter. Her maternal instincts spilled over as she rocked my daughter and sang to her.

Aunt Ginny had Down's Syndrome. I say "had" not because Down's Syndrome is something one grows out of but because, after 49 years of life, Aunt Ginny left this world. She left us richer and missing her gifts and the brightness she brought to us.

My husband was the lucky one. He grew up with Aunt Ginny. I met her as an adult. She was the first person I'd ever known with Down's Syndrome. Like many my age, I grew up pre-IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). Children with differences were in some classroom somewhere, but not in mine. A modern tragedy.

Now, thanks to IDEA, the law requires "a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment to eligible students with disabilities, including special education and related services." If Aunt Ginny were a child today, she might take a seat alongside my own children in public school.

"Inclusion," the practice of welcoming all children into classrooms, opens up a whole new world of discussion for parent and child. Reading books that help your children see into the world of children with challenges will help them overcome any fears they have about "differentness" and teach them that, inside, we are all much the same.

Our Brother Has Down's Syndrome by Shelley Cairo is the story of Jai, a boy with Down's Syndrome. Told from the perspective of his two older sisters, the story shares a clear message that "mostly he's just like the rest of us." Photographs of Jai and his sisters show that people with Down's Syndrome look different from others but "mostly they look like their families."

When children stare at people with differences, they are simply and naturally being inquisitive. *Someone Special Just Like You* by Tricia Brown, with photographs by Fran Ortiz, allows readers to "stare" and be

inquisitive without making anyone else uncomfortable. The book contains photographs of children with various challenges in situations common to all children—blowing bubbles, swimming, talking on the telephone. The book will help your children learn about and appreciate a wide range of humanness.

In Isaac Millman's *Moses Goes to a Concert*, a class of children who are deaf attend a musical concert. By holding balloons, the students literally feel the music through vibrations. The book, which includes diagrams for signing words and simple phrases, encourages all of us to focus on how much challenged individuals *can* do.

Kids are physical creatures and they take to talking with their hands like turtles to a log in a lake. As a kindergarten teacher, I taught my students to sign "The Pledge of Allegiance." Unlike many kids their age, they didn't say "invisible, with liberty." They learned what "indivisible" means by acting it out in sign language. *Songs in Sign*, part of the Beginning Sign Language series, offers lessons in this special language.

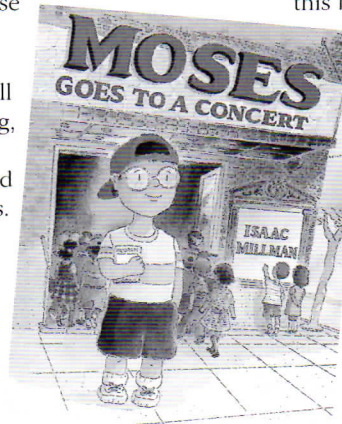
I've had many discussions with my mother-in-law about using correct, delicate, non-agitating words when describing disabilities. She avoids labels, preferring to say that a person *has* a disability rather than is disabled. *Help Is On the Way: A Child's*

Book About ADD, by Marc A. Nemiroff and Jane Annunziata and illustrated by Margaret Scott, describes attention deficit disorder as a challenge some children face rather than labeling these children "ADD." Published by the American Psychological Association, the book is designed to appeal to students with ADD and empowers them to face the problems they often encounter.

If Hollywood complains that there are "no good roles for women," the children's book counterpart could be "there are no good characters for the disabled." Too often, only books specifically about disabilities show characters with physical or mental challenges. *How Smudge Came*, however, stars a young woman with Down's Syndrome. In this book by Nan

Gregory, featuring touching pictures by Ron Lightburn, the story revolves around the main character's love for a dog, not her disability. As I read this story, Aunt Ginny seemed to leap off the page.

Each year, Aunt Ginny's sister invites our family to attend a banquet celebrating special people. Even though the event is for her students, acceptance speeches are heavily peppered with praise for Dolores. As my mother-in-law demonstrates, children who are exposed to children with challenges today become advocates for them tomorrow.



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