



Thinking About..

EMPOWERMENT

We all talk about the need to empower young people, but what does that word mean? Is it something that can be taught like history? Is it some sort of psychological medicine that can cure crushed spirits and create an extrovert from a wallflower?

My belief is that we are born powerful. I think the task is not to give people power, but to stop taking it away. I have been thinking about how I set about trying to protect my own disabled child from losing hers and suggest that there are three essential components to empowerment.

The first is self-confidence. How did I attempt to nurture self-confidence in that tiny 'brittle' baby I brought home from Hospital on a foam mattress? Looking back I can see that it was a full time job. Gentle touches, body massages, smiling, looking at her with a delighted (not worried) expression, responding to her signals, allowing her to teach me what she needed. (This was quite easy as I knew nothing about babies). I chose friends who would be equally delighted

with her to be my helpers in those early days. I avoided talking negatively about her in her earshot even when she was too young to understand speech. I shared any worries and frustrations in another room. I did not even let doctors describe her in anything other than positive language to her face. They were surprisingly good about this, but how much this was because I had the same impairment I will never know.

I had noticed how adults unawares laugh at young children, and humiliate them when they get things wrong or say 'funny' things. I always tried not to do this, and to stop others doing it because I was sure that this is one of the ways we become unsure of ourselves and afraid to be ourselves.

I had also noticed how adults lie to young children by giving them silly explanations or half-truths when they ask questions. (I have a burning memory from my childhood of a parent leaving her two year old in hospital by telling her she was going to get her a

drink of orange, walking out of the ward and going home. The child was still standing in her cot crying inconsolably two hours later, staring at the door, waiting for her Mummy with her drink. I vowed then that I would never do anything like that. How could that child trust adults ever again?)

Praise not punishment, a thousand pieces of positive feedback, clear explanations of boundaries and expectations, all this creates a person who feels loved and alright about themselves. There is no substitute other than at least one adult in a parental role who can bestow this daily upon a child. No one does well without it and it is why I am against institutional provision for children, disabled or not.

The second component is information. We in the inclusion movement spend much of our time explaining that impairment is not a cause of unhappiness in itself. It is the way people are treated that is the problem we all



need to address. To hold out to a disabled child that they are not the problem, that they don't need to be cured to be valuable, and that they have much to offer the world is essential if that child is to keep their self-confidence in the face of the oppression which will inevitably come their way. This information can be taught in courses,

workshops, through the media and by friends and advocates. It is a form of political education which has helped many disabled people to make sense of things.

The last component is resources. My daughter's first resources were my friends. I truly believe that it was those people who came and allowed themselves to be her arms and legs whilst she steered them around our flat by voice control, going to things she wanted to explore – taps, ornaments, food, toys, water, which led her to believe that she could rely on other human beings to co-operate with her ideas and bring them to fruition. I am sure this has helped her hugely with the task of directing her personal assistants and other people whose help she has needed. Later she invented mental scripts for endless pretend games in which everyone had a part. I was always amazed at how other children would submit to this

directorship, and come back for more.

As well as this vital human resource, we soon started the long miserable battles for material resources – wheelchairs, transport, bath hoists, and for facilitators at school and at home. Here my empowerment was so important as we were forced to engage in bureaucratic battles of marathon proportions. Yet without these resources even the most self-confident and well informed disabled people like us, are trapped and powerless. With the right resources our lives can be transformed.



Micheline

SELF-CONFIDENCE
+
INFORMATION
+
RESOURCES
=

EMPOWERMENT

Our fight for inclusion is a fight for empowered parents, empowered teachers and empowered young people. What an attractive goal to have!

Micheline Mason