

Tom Shakespeare, Israeli Society for Child Development Biennial congress

ABSTRACT: Childhood disability: not a medical issue?

Disability is not a medical issue? This seems ridiculous to parents who struggle with health issues for children with all sorts of disabling conditions. But I think we should re-think disability as a social, environmental, political and psychological issue – as well as a medical issue. The disability rights movement challenge us to understand the barriers that disable people – including children. Lack of access; negative attitudes; inappropriate provision; poor communication – all these comprise big difficulties for disable people, and lead us to think of ourselves as second class citizens. For this reason, I believe people are disabled by society, as well as by their bodies (or minds). In this approach, the emphasis changes to how we can re-structure society to be more inclusive and welcoming. After all, disability is a fact of life – it is up to us how we accommodate these differences. Here's some evidence: back in 1998, when we researched 'life as a disabled child' in UK, our respondents told us they did not consider themselves 'disabled' – they wanted to be children, like their peers. Moreover, we saw that there was not one 'disabled child' – there were thousands of different children with disabilities, with the normal range of hopes and fears, talents and limitations. In the world of autism, ADHD and other 'neurodevelopmental disabilities', people with these conditions redefine themselves as 'neurodiverse', and challenge us 'neurotypicals' to be more inclusive, and to recognise their talents, as well as their deficits. More evidence comes from widespread empirical studies which show that children with disabilities have a quality of life as good as non-disabled children (unless they experience lots of pain), or that show that participation barriers are at least as much of an obstacle as innate physical limitations. Finally, evidence comes from testimonies of parents who challenge professionals to include their children, work in partnership with them as parents, and find a way through the multi-dimensional complexity of childhood disability. In this talk, I will try to offer a balanced, multi-dimensional account of disability which challenges us to think differently – and I speak as a researcher, as a disabled adult (who was in his time a disabled child!) and as parent of two, now adult, disabled children, and supporter and friend of many more.

#### EVENING TALK WITH PARENTS

I would like this to be a dialogue, where I hear from participants about how they are living and parenting with their disabled children. I would like to discuss how we can adapt and change things to promote inclusion. I would like to discuss where children with disabilities need mainstream provision, and where specialist provision is appropriate. I would like to talk about how we can promote friendship for disabled children and peers. I would like to discuss how we can promote positive, realistic, self-esteem for disabled children and adults. I would like to discuss how parents can celebrate their strengths and learning, work in partnership with professionals, and celebrate the benefits of parenting disabled kids. There's so much to talk about, and I am open to this event being shaped by participants.