

EDUCATION WEEK

Social Skills are Critical for Those with Disabilities **March 23, 2011**

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COMMENTARY

Social Skills Are Critical for Those With Disabilities

By Sandra Houghton

Imagine a childhood without play dates or birthday parties, sleepovers or school dances. Doesn't sound like much of a childhood, does it? Well, for children with disabilities—developmental and otherwise—it is, more often than not, the norm.

Having grown up with cerebral palsy, I know what it feels like to be “different.” Even within my own family I felt like an outcast. My brother could do no wrong. My little sister had the looks and the brains. But I was just the disabled kid. I didn't have the opportunities that my siblings had. I had no friends, no social experiences.

During my school years, I was a target for bullies; ridiculed for the way I talked, the way I walked, and even the way I dressed. On top of that, I had no support system. Sure, I had my fair share of sympathetic teachers, but on the whole, there were no systems in place to help me. I graduated at the bottom of my class and struggled as a young adult to find meaning and purpose in my life. Unfortunately, my story is no different from that of most students with developmental disabilities.

I got lucky when I connected with people from the [Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council](#), or MDDC, who helped me find an identity and purpose. It was a long and often painful road, but I am a better and happier person having gone down it. What I learned was this: The skills that were most important for me to grow didn't come from a textbook or a classroom; they came through developing what professionals today refer to as “soft skills” or social skills.

I have seen firsthand the importance of teaching self-awareness and social communication to students. Youngsters and teenagers without disabilities learn these skills through peer

interaction and social opportunities. Skills such as making and keeping friends, being a good listener, being a team player, and being assertive rather than aggressive are what contribute to future success as an adult. But for people with disabilities, most school environments provide little to no opportunity to develop these skills.

Fortunately, I gained a support system through the MDDC and learned new advocacy skills that helped me stand up for myself. In 2000-01, I received a [Gopen Fellowship](#), which provides mentoring and financial support for someone with a developmental disability, or a family member, to work in the disability-advocacy field to empower others like me to be agents of change. As a fellow, I developed the leadership course I now teach at MDDC.

My leadership series at MDDC provides an interactive learning environment that focuses on the person, teaching individuals about themselves, their strengths, and their abilities. We introduce different ways that people communicate, the way our body language speaks to people, and how attitudes and feelings influence our behavior toward others. We teach students how to work together, how to dress for success, and how to be part of a team. Ultimately, the program works to improve a person's self-esteem, increase confidence to try new things, and develop the soft skills needed to succeed.

I struggled to get where I am today, and it pains me to see that young people are still struggling decades later. Understanding who you are as a person and how to make a good impression on others is necessary for success in life.

School is tough—and it's even worse for children with disabilities, who are too often alienated from their peers and made easy targets for bullies. By sticking up for children with disabilities and fostering inclusive environments in our schools, we can dispel the indifference that shelters bullying.

As a society, we must invest time and effort to develop and expand support systems and training programs similar to those at MDDC for students and young adults transitioning out of the education system. Focusing on soft skills will enhance opportunities for students and young adults with disabilities to improve their social skills, increase their self-confidence, and lead more productive lives.

No one should feel left out.

Sandra Houghton is a self-advocate for human rights and public services for individuals with developmental disabilities. She developed the Self-Advocacy Leadership Series, or SALS, which is the first long-term program in the United States to teach individuals with developmental disabilities to become "self-advocates" through improving communication and social skills. Ms. Houghton conducts SALS training seminars for the Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council, in Quincy, Mass.