

## **“WHY HAS YOUR MUM GOT LITTLE ARMS?”**

### **PREVENTING BULLYING AT SCHOOL**

**By Simone Baker**

It has always been very important that for every stage of Lois' childcare that I have felt happy and “accepted” by the various individuals who would be providing care for Lois.

Fortunately, most of the time, I have made the “right” choice the first time round! Whilst most able bodied parents, choosing an early years place or school place would involve looking at what the setting can offer their child, I think as a disabled parent, I had to be quite selfish and look at what it offered me as well – whether it was accessible, whether I felt accepted, whether I could manage their “routine” and where I couldn't, there was flexibility to adapt.

Whilst my daughter Lois was at pre-school, I ensured that I was always around the children from the start. I wanted to ensure that Lois wasn't questioned or teased by other children about my disability. I didn't want her to feel that her Mum was any different to the other Mums. I took my turn on the “parents rota”, but had to leave some of the tasks, which were more difficult for me to the other rota parent. I wouldn't have been able to manage a rota on my own, but it was vital to me that I did participate in this way, as Lois would look forward to it, and feel very important!

I served as Chair of the pre-school for a year, so I was often about during the day in the company of the children who attended. Some asked questions about my disability, which is very obvious (all four limbs shortened as a result of Thalidomide, and three fingers on each hand), but the majority just enjoyed my participating in their games and activities (being a customer at their make-belief café, etc). What better way can there be to develop in young minds an acceptance of disability than to be a make-belief customer with a disability!

My choice of Primary School was determined by the fact that I had attended the school some thirty years previously, and that my memories were mostly very fond ones. I looked at another school (we weren't in the catchment area for my first choice school). It was a Victorian school, and whilst it was small and friendly, I could see there would be a problem with getting Lois into the school safely. I can't walk very far, and the school didn't have any parking – it was located down a very narrow residential road.

We were given a place at the school of my choice. It felt like “going home”, and I had developed a confidence in the company of small children from my involvement at the Pre-School. When Lois started at Primary School, I arranged with the Head of the Infants to go and speak to all of the Infant classes about disability generally, and to explain to them how my disability was caused, and how it affected me. I also encouraged the children to ask me any questions. I did this within the first few weeks of Lois starting at the school.

This proved to be an extremely useful exercise. I encouraged the children to think about different types of impairments, and to share with me stories about people they knew who had a disability, and the problems they encountered.

I then explained that my disability actually prevents me from doing very little, and I concentrated on the things that I can do, such as driving a car, drawing and writing and even skiing! The children's questioned me enthusiastically at the end of my talk, and I encouraged my daughter to help me answer the questions (which made her feel very important!). I also told the children that if they had any other questions they wanted to ask me after the session, I wouldn't mind them asking me as long as they asked politely. The teachers also asked me questions, but were interested more in some of the historical information about Thalidomide, and I was happy to enlighten them.

From that moment on, I have felt accepted and very happy whilst around the school. The children often shout “Hello Mrs Baker!” when they see me waiting at the school gate. I try to go into the school once a week to help children in Lois' class with reading and working on the computer, and I now seem to be very much accepted as part of the furniture!

I would encourage all disabled parents wherever possible to take the lead in going into schools, meeting children and being prepared to answer questions about their disability. This avoids their child being questioned, raises the issue of diversity and difference, and can only be of benefit to everyone concerned!

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