

## **Breaking down the barriers:**

### **The importance of a clear vision for supporting real connections**

*Gina Wilson-Burns*

Mac's parents have a clear vision for their son having all the good experiences that kids generally crave. Kids want to be with other kids. No one wants to be left out and not involved in the games, the talk and all the shared experiences that generate from kids being together. For children, school represents a huge part of their lives and the place they meet and interact with the most kids. For this reason, Mac's parents wanted him to attend his local public school in the regular class with all the other kids in the area.

Mac needs support at school and has a full-time aide. He communicates with a communication device and uses a wheelchair. Mac's parents were concerned that even though he was in the regular classroom, other kids may be reluctant to connect with him, if they felt that was something only adults could do. If a teacher's aide or other adult was always with Mac, it might communicate that he couldn't be approached by kids. Mac's parents thought this idea might be reinforced if Mac's movement around the school during classes and at breaks times was always facilitated by an adult. They didn't want these things to become barriers to Mac being connected and involved with other kids.

Mac's parents had a creative idea about how to encourage other students to engage with Mac. They would structure an opportunity for students to learn and design a means by which to support Mac to move around the school during class-time and also in break-times without an adult. A meeting was called during the lunch hour for children who were interested to be part of the discussion and planning for how this might be achieved. Twenty-five children attended the meeting of their own volition and became the designers, organisers and the first certified Wheelchair Attendant License holders.

It took some time and research before the idea got off the ground. The school was cautious. Mac's parents did their homework and sought advice from the Education Department and a legal team. The legal advice was for a thorough risk assessment to safeguard Mac and other children. As for the school's concerns, Mac's parents made it clear to them that Mac's connection and opportunity to engage with other students was the single most important thing for them in their son's entire school experience. It was more important than having all his educational needs met, as they knew relationships were key to a successful and happy life. They wanted to create strategies that would enable Mac to be involved and participate with his

peers. Sharing their vision for Mac's inclusion to the fullest extent possible with the school enabled the school to understand why Mac's parents wanted no barriers between Mac and other children. The school agreed to the project idea and assisted in finding ways to make it happen.

The students that were part of the planning and design group were involved in tasks related to the risk assessment and came up with 'the rules' of who could be licensed to push a wheelchair and how. They also mapped the school into zones for where any child with a license could push the chair, to areas that only older students could push a chair and zones that were strictly for an adult.

Gina (Mac's mum) was impressed with the sensible ideas of the children and their insight into what was safe for Mac and what was not. The project has been a success with more than one third of the school signing up to be wheelchair attendants. With the students help, an information PowerPoint was created to teach others how to respectfully support a person in a wheelchair move around. The idea has been used by other people in other settings, as a strategy to achieve what matters most, engagement and connection. Gina wanted kids to know that you don't have to be paid support to connect with a person with disability and this was the strategy that worked for Mac.

Gina knew they were on the way to achieving the goal when Mac got to compete in as many races as he wished on athletics day because he had willing partners to run the races with him. He even ran in the 800 metre race with a group of boys who took turns to push through the race. By the end of the race the last child started to flag and rather than see Mac not finish the race another mum jumped up and pushed Mac over the line. Gina was thrilled, as she could see that people felt free to support Mac's participation because there were no longer any barriers between them. It was great to hear the kids cheering Mac along, as well as the kids running with him.

Having a clear vision for inclusion gave Mac's parents the resolve to think and strategise creatively about how they would encourage Mac not to simply be present or a spectator in community settings but participate and contribute. It gave them the courage to try something new and have a 'whatever it takes' attitude to support their son to have the opportunity to make connections with others, especially his peers.



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