

## Getting involved: roles, relationships and good times

*Shari Raymond*

Our son Jye can do anything. It's just that he often does things a little bit differently to other children his age. He is heavily involved in his community, which we see as vital to helping him to enjoy an ordinary, regular life. Though we've made mistakes at times, Jye is happy, confident and has a strong network of friends and family.

One of the things we've focused on is making sure that Jye has appropriate roles and opportunities to enjoy the things that other ten year olds are involved in. Like many other boys his age, he loves sport and is a gifted athlete. He's particularly keen on rugby league and, after meeting the Melbourne Storm team, is a passionate fan of theirs. He is also a good swimmer, basketballer and always does well at school carnivals in discus and shot put. He doesn't let the fact that he has cerebral palsy and uses a wheel chair get in his way. As he's told me, "I don't throw discus with my legs."

Jye has many friends at the mainstream school that he attends and shares a number of interests with his mates. Among other things, he's a wrestling fan, fisherman, gamer and camper. These are the types of things that other children his age relate to, which ensure that he is included in the conversations with his peers. We think this is so important because, as much as our family does everything they can to support Jye, nobody can help him be a ten year old except other ten year olds.



After attending a few events run by Family Advocacy and listening to other parents talk, we began to realise how important these types of roles are for Jye. They help make sure that he is included and treated like the other children his age. Jye's older sisters take it for granted that he will be fully included in all school activities, whether it be excursions or sports like AFL, cricket or soccer. The question is never "Should he be involved?" but rather "How do we make it happen"? There may be obstacles, but there is always someone, like a teacher or aide, who truly "gets it". When you find them, you hang onto these people because they are your allies.

Jye is well known in our community. He's a regular spectator at his sisters' soccer and netball games, where he's built up a reputation as being the "giggler". We made a conscious decision to encourage him to attend each weekend and the results have been tremendous. These social interactions have helped expand his networks – helping to make him visible and valued. No one could miss Jye yelling at his sisters from the sidelines.

He's also recognised at our annual camping trip. We make sure that we go to the same place at the same time each year. Our fellow campers expect to see him and would look out for him if he were to ever get in trouble. On one of our last holidays, a family put Jye in a doughnut and towed him around in their speedboat. Naturally, he had the time of his life and these memories are priceless.

Jye has a number of good friends in the neighbourhood and school. He's been to sleepovers and overnight school excursions and loves to fish and play video games with his best mate. We've always made sure to encourage these ordinary friendships. Jye has had numerous well attended birthday parties and he's attended other children's birthday parties as well, including discos and rock climbing. As I've told other parents, if Jye's invited, we can find ways to make it happen – however "impossible" it may seem.

Jye's neighbours have taken him to their farm where he's done all the regular things that boys love: riding quad bikes and tractors and feeding the animals. These are the ordinary things that make up a childhood yet it wasn't until last year that he got his first scab – at age nine! As much as all of us want to protect our children, a full ordinary life is full of bumps and bruises.

One thing we've learnt is that there's always a way to make sure that Jye is included. For instance, in school yard soccer he's allowed to kick the ball with his wheelchair. The positives we've seen for Jye are enormous. For example, by the end of each swimming term, he has been introduced to a whole new group of young people, who see him as just another regular kid.

So what does it all mean for Jye?

As I said earlier, he's happy. He has good self esteem and confidence. He has family and friends who see him for the person that he is. Through his sporting roles and achievements he's been exposed to things that I would never have dreamed possible. He has the ability and confidence to ask other people for assistance if he needs it.

There are thousands of people in our town who either know or recognise Jye, which influences the way people think and helps with the inclusion process for all people. It's crucial that he is out in the community, whether at netball, soccer or wherever, so that even from afar people can see what he can achieve. All of these ordinary roles have helped us and others realise that there is no ceiling to what he can do.

Jye is many things and has many roles. He's outgoing, has a good sense of humour, loves to write and is a talented sportsman. He also happens to be interested in many of the same things that other children his age enjoy and these hobbies help him connect with his peers. These normal connections are part of what it is to be a young person and give us confidence for the future.

Of course, it hasn't just happened automatically. It has taken work and always being on the lookout for opportunities that will help him to be fully included. I think it is really important to see and appreciate the importance of typical friendships that young people have and make sure that these are facilitated. My advice to other families is to be prepared to make mistakes, because you learn from these but then push on. Get out there and be involved in everything. It's the ordinary things that will make for a great life.



W: [www.resourcingfamilies.org.au](http://www.resourcingfamilies.org.au)

P: 9869 7753 or 1800 774 764 (free call outside metro areas)

E: [info@resourcingfamilies.org.au](mailto:info@resourcingfamilies.org.au)