

LETTERS

Editor's Note: We generally give preference to signed letters. However, we recently have received many thoughtful letters from writers with strong personal or professional reasons for remaining anonymous. (Our first letter in this issue, for example, was sent by a noted professional who prefers to remain anonymous because "I'm in enough trouble already.") Thus, we are including more unsigned letters than usual in this issue.

Full Inclusion

To the Editor:

Your article on "inclusive education" addresses some important issues. Several years ago I was asked to consult on a case involving a severely handicapped high school age girl. She was wheelchair bound, profoundly mentally retarded with functioning in the 15 to 20 month sensorimotor level (mental age). Among her problems were the inability to classify common objects, arrange items in a series, or understand logical relationships.

The Regular Education Initiative proponents wanted this child placed full time in a regular classroom. This means algebra, high school English, art, etc. She had three normal I.Q. "friends" who over time wished to break off their friendship. However, they were pressured by teachers and advocates to spend large amounts of school time with the handicapped child even though they did not wish to do so. My view is that the children were all being "used" to promote a particular special education ideology.

(name withheld by request)

To the Editor:

My husband and I are parents of two children with autism. Both are in non-public schools funded by the School Board. The schools [and class sizes] are very small. One teacher and two trained aides are in each class. Speech and OT are on site. The staff knows and deeply cares about my children.

What parent wouldn't want their child in such a school? These schools are, however, very expensive, \$20,000 a year per child, plus busing. Therein lies the problem. It is far cheaper to have your child "included" than to send him to a special school.

In the late 1970s I was an interpreter for the deaf. We moved children from a residential deaf school to a regular public school. Two of the schools I worked in were rough inner city schools. I was a support person with five or six girls in my case load. To say I was overloaded is to put it mildly. If I became ill, substitutes were difficult to find and often woefully undertrained. The teachers were unable to communicate with the children so they ignored them. This was what was called mainstreaming. Inclusion is a new name for an old idea, an idea that didn't work well 15 years ago.

Tremendous pressure [for inclusion] is brought to bear on parents whose dream it is for their children to be in normal schools. The mere hope that your child can "make it" with

regular children is a cruel sales pitch. It does, however, save the school board thousands of dollars while you try it out. Once you're in a regular school it may take years and half a dozen placements to convince the school board that inclusion is not working—years that our kids can't afford to lose. My advice is to look clearly at your child's needs, both educational and emotional, not yours, and certainly not the school board's continual financial woes.

(Name withheld by request)

Landa Study/DMG

To the Editor:

As a participant in Rebecca Landa's Family Autism Study, I feel that I must comment on your note regarding her study. We experienced the utmost courtesy during our extensive participation in the study. Never was there any implication that we might be to blame for our daughter's autism.

(Editor's note: I was not concerned about courtesy, but rather about parents' reaction to being given psychological rather than medical tests.)

My daughter has been on DMG for almost 1-1/2 years. In that time, we experienced miracles. At age five, her speech was almost totally echolalic, with constant pronoun reversal. She had never said "yes," and her attention span was very poor. Her muscle tone was very low. We had been told that many motor skills, such as jumping and bike riding, would never be achieved. At this time, we have independent speech, and she can answer most questions. She started saying "yes" after 10 days on DMG. Abby's teacher noticed an improvement in her attention span within two weeks. Her motor skills have improved dramatically. After six months on DMG, her muscle tone reached normal levels. She still has motor delays, but she can jump, and has recently learned to ride a two-wheel bike with training wheels!

Karen Reznick

More on Facilitated Communication

To the Editor:

I am very distressed that some parents are having such devastating experiences with F/C. This does present a lot of fears to us parents; however, my 35 year old autistic son has been facilitating for about nine months now and I know that his conversation could come from no one else but himself because I am his facilitator. When Greg and I visit with each other through F/C a whole new world is opening up for both of us, and for a fact I know that his conversation does not come from me. We as parents need to be very selective in who facilitates our kids, for both their protection and ours, but don't condemn this wonderful tool that has opened the world for many.

Betha M. Kagayama

To the Editor:

We had read with interest the articles re abuses being reported via F/C, but we thought this could never happen to us. We believed F/C held such promise for our child (nonverbal with autism) who had used the technique for about one year. Besides, we

were told, what could it hurt? Ironically, the next week we were summoned to school with no explanation. Upon arrival we were told we had been reported to Protective Services for alleged sexual abuse of our child, communicated via F/C.

I was stunned. But I believed the staff would educate themselves about my child's disability, F/C, and the best way to decipher what was being communicated. To my horror I soon found nothing could be further from the truth. No attempt was made to understand autism or F/C by the Protective Services staff. My child was asked graphic and leading questions, all in the process of "proving" the allegation. No attempt was made to establish the validity of our child's communications and the only person used as a facilitator was the same aide from whom the suspicious communications first arose!

Finding attorneys knowledgeable about autism, F/C and child abuse is a challenge in itself. Again, we had to be the educators...except the stakes were higher than ever. We were about to lose our child unjustly. We had only tried to give her every opportunity. Incredibly, the pain was worse than that we felt so long ago when we first heard the word "autism" as a diagnosis for our child.

Fortunately the ARRI information regarding similar cases was enough to cast some doubt, so our child was not taken from us. But it was disheartening to see the prejudices of the professionals. It was so easy for them to believe a child with autism was abused—and so difficult to believe a child with autism was truly loved and cared for properly.

Parents, especially those with children with rare disabilities, need to know that the Child Protection system is terribly flawed. Don't go on our word alone...read "The Real Abuse," *National Review*, April 12, 1993; "The Panic Over Child Abuse," *Newsweek*, April 19, 1993; and "Modern Witch Hunt," *Wall Street Journal*, February 22, 1993. Parents of F/C using children are not the only victims. A recent Maury Povich show profiled three families whose children have a rare bone disease called OI. When they took their children to hospitals after bone fractures, their children were taken from them. We have learned to our horror that Dr. Richard Gardner, child abuse expert at Columbia University, is correct when he states, "the child abuse establishment...encourages charges of child abuse whether they are reasonable or not."

(name withheld by request)

To the Editor:

We have been in contact with many families accused via F/C of abusing their children. In each instance the allegations have been unfounded, yet certain authorities have made a sham of justice and scientific reality in their cult-like belief in the "miracle" of F/C. Parents, siblings, caregivers, and others whose lives have been torn apart by F/C allegations are forming a support group. If you fall into this category, you are not alone. Feel free to call:

Mark and Laura S., (914) 657-7127, or
Larry and Martha E., (408) 233-6320.

(name withheld by request)