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**Abstract**

This short article discusses what is, on the face of it, "safe" for people who have disabilities and what is right. The author, a parent, says "please do not protect our children from living their lives to the fullest out of concern for their safety! This is a false concern and can only hold them back from life". **Keyword:**

**Attitudes**

# FOCUS ON FAMILIES

## *When "Safe" is No Longer Enough*

by Val Shaffer  
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One recent sunny day, a woman told me that it was not "safe" for my son to watch her family play baseball. She had earlier declined, quite politely, to let us join in. Now she wanted him off the field for "safety" reasons. I explained that I felt comfortable letting him sit quietly on his bicycle to one side of homeplate, watching the batters (themselves helmetless). She exploded. Her angry rejecting words were so out of proportion to the situation that I quickly realised her problem. She could not accept my son because he has mental retardation and communicates through sign language.

I contemplated a variety of angry responses (how I wished for the slashing wit and blade of Cyrano de Bergerac!) - choking with hurt, I could only firmly state that I would no longer talk with her. I walked away. Now, calmer, I take this opportunity to speak to her.

"Things have changed a great deal since you were a child. A marvellous wind of change is blowing throughout the land, bringing new challenges and successes for those brave enough to seize them, for themselves or for others.

"Once women were kept out of much of the labour force because they were the "frail" sex. It wasn't "safe" to allow the mothers of our children to labour on assembly lines, fly airplanes, or, perhaps, sit in corporate executive offices. Early activists - suffragettes - faced the angry and sometimes violent disapproval of much of the rest of society. Their campaign to acquire voting rights for women was not a "safe" course of action, only the right one.

"Once, African Americans were discouraged and prevented from registering to vote, from attending schools they knew to be better, from working jobs which paid them a decent living wage. I'm sure that the first parents to send their children to all-white schools were told by the well-intentioned that it wasn't "safe". It wasn't on the face of it safe, but they sent them anyway because it was the right thing to do. **Rosa Parks** did not do the "safe" thing when she kept her seat on the bus, only the right thing.

"Now children and adults with disabilities and their families are asking to be included in the mainstream of life in our communities. No longer are young children, diagnosed with Down Syndrome at birth, automatically doomed to early institutionalisation. No longer does the medical profession recommend that children with autism - once thought to be an infantile form of schizophrenia brought on by early maternal rejection - be similarly separated

for years from their "unsafe" mothers. No longer are children with disabilities kept home while their brothers and sisters go off to school and on to life.

"Instead, thanks to PL94-142 (now the IDEA, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), and the Rehabilitation Act, children with disabilities must now be provided with a free and appropriate education *in the least restrictive environment*, LRE. What this means is an admission that all children can learn. It also means that children with disabilities must be provided with opportunities for learning that are appropriate to their age group, that are meaningful and functional (i.e. typing, not bead-stringing, for 12-year-olds), and that it take place in as normal a classroom setting as possible.

"Today, students with disabilities learn with their fellows in regular classrooms. They are learning at their own rates and in their own way. Adaptations to the curriculum often need to be made. What surprises people is that once these changes are begun, all students who need to learn in different ways benefit. Many students have undiagnosed learning disabilities, emotional problems, dysfunctional homes, a limited understanding of English, or difficulty in maintaining their focus, among other "disabilities".

"A few children still remain in self-contained classes or even self-contained schools. In Arizona, never in the forefront of educational reform, the separate schools and classes are nonetheless going the way of the dinosaurs. I recently learned that in the Kayenta School District on the Navajo reservation, the Dept. of Special Ed has essentially been eliminated. All children with disabilities - and I do mean **all** - are in regular classrooms there.

"How does the concept of LRE function in the context of safety? We have all heard of: the children who cannot go on the school band field trips because it is not "safe"; the children who are taught to ride an elaborate cardboard "bus" instead of the "unsafe" real bus; the fifth grader who cannot study science with his fellows because it is not safe. If indeed these activities are unsafe for children with disabilities, surely they are also unsafe for all children? Should we examine, as I did when faced with such anger, what is at the root of this concern over safety?

"We **know** that children and adults with disabilities can: participate in sports of all kinds, from basketball to Little League; learn in schools and in universities; contribute to their communities through their work and their volunteer activities; have friends and lovers who value them for the caring they bring to their relationships. My son, by the way, hits a great line drive.

"Please do not protect our children from living their lives to the fullest out of concern for their safety! This is a false concern and can only hold them back from life. As **Dennis Bismayer** of Kayenta wrote: "We have a dream that one day, in every community, in every school, in every classroom, children who walk and children who don't, children who talk and children who don't, children who see and children who don't, children who hear and children who don't, will be able to join hands, and together enter as peers and friends.

"See you on the ball field!"