

As a teacher in the special education field for almost 15 years, I have come across countless challenged children, and a spectrum of different disabilities. Like all teachers, I see the growth a child can make in the right environment, with teachers adapting their teaching styles and methods to suit the very different needs of these students. As a parent of a challenged child, I see what many teachers do not. I see the growth a child with challenges can make over as many as 25 years.

At birth, my daughter suffered severe asphyxia due to insufficient oxygen to her brain. As a result, she has been afflicted with Cerebral Palsy, which has affected her speech and motor skills. At 24, she has exceptional hearing and understands so much more than most give her credit. The glossary of words that she can pronounce is small but growing, and although she does not perform any standardized sign language, she has created her own. Not only does she communicate; she is very talkative.

In every other way, she is like any average young female: fashion conscious, loves Rihanna, is obsessed with cell phones, and divides her time between the computer and the television. She enjoys meeting new people and with one of the most amazing memories I have ever come across, never forgets a face. She is independent and helpful to a fault.

She was my reason for switching from mainstream education to special needs education. I hoped not only to learn more ways in which I could help my daughter, but to help any child in the same manner.

My daughter attended Erdiston Annex, the Learning Centre and many of the workshops hosted by the Children's Development Workshop. She also spent time in a Long Island programme where she benefitted from their stimulation exercises. One feature I found in that programme which I believe is missing locally was counseling for the parents. As a teacher in a special education unit, I come across many parents who refuse or are unable to accept their children's challenges. As a result they do not get the help they need and as a result can become lost in the mainstream.

Raising a challenged child is difficult. Those who are considered high functioning are accommodated at facilities like the Chandler Creative Arts and Training Centre where they learn production skills such as using a sewing machine and computer skills. My

daughter is considered low functioning because of her low motor skills and inability to speak. After the age of 18 there are no facilities on the island to accommodate the low functioning. Consequently, both the young adult and their parents are left in a difficult position.

Low functioning young adults cannot be employed and they have no structured activities to occupy their time and few opportunities to socialize outside of the family unit. As supervision is of the utmost importance, it is necessary for them to have caregivers. With both my husband and myself working, it is a struggle to balance our jobs and our daughter the supervision she needs. Thankfully her retired grandparents have gladly accepted the responsibility, but at their age it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to continue doing so.

Barbados, therefore, has an acute need for facilities that will provide an opportunity for challenged adults to socialize, to meet people and to learn new skills. I see many young adults like my daughter, not having any outlets for their energy or opportunities to exercise their independence. Many parents are struggling to find not just supervision for their challenged children but activities that interest and include them.

In Jamaica there is a centre where young challenged adults, while under supervision, not only have the opportunity to socialize with each another, but to make a contribution. When I visited the centre, they were busily stuffing envelopes for the Salvation Army. Hence, it is my view that even a day care for low functioning young adults would be an invaluable place where they can spend their days taking part in suitable activities from fixing puzzles to creating jewelry. They need to get some exercise and, most importantly, to socialize and feel involved.

Our education system has come a long way but more opportunities need to be provided not just from government but from our private sector if we are to make these young adults with challenges an active and contributing part of our society.

Written by Angela Gilkes