

AGAPE



BELONGING WITH DISABILITY

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Dear Reader

Welcome to our 11th issue of AGAPE! Today, we're going to learn about disability and how to support belonging in our communities!

Helping those around you feel safe and welcomed is a daily choice, especially when some of us are regularly pushed to the sidelines.

People with disabilities often miss out on fun activities or cool opportunities because their needs aren't recognized.

This is called inaccessibility. Together we'll learn to recognize when someone is being excluded due to disability and how to help in ways that prioritize the person's wants and respects their needs.

Remember, everyone deserves to belong - including you! That's why this issue also includes a letter of encouragement, tools for processing big feelings, and helpful ways to express personal boundaries.

So, without further adieu - let's get to learning!

Peace, Alisha
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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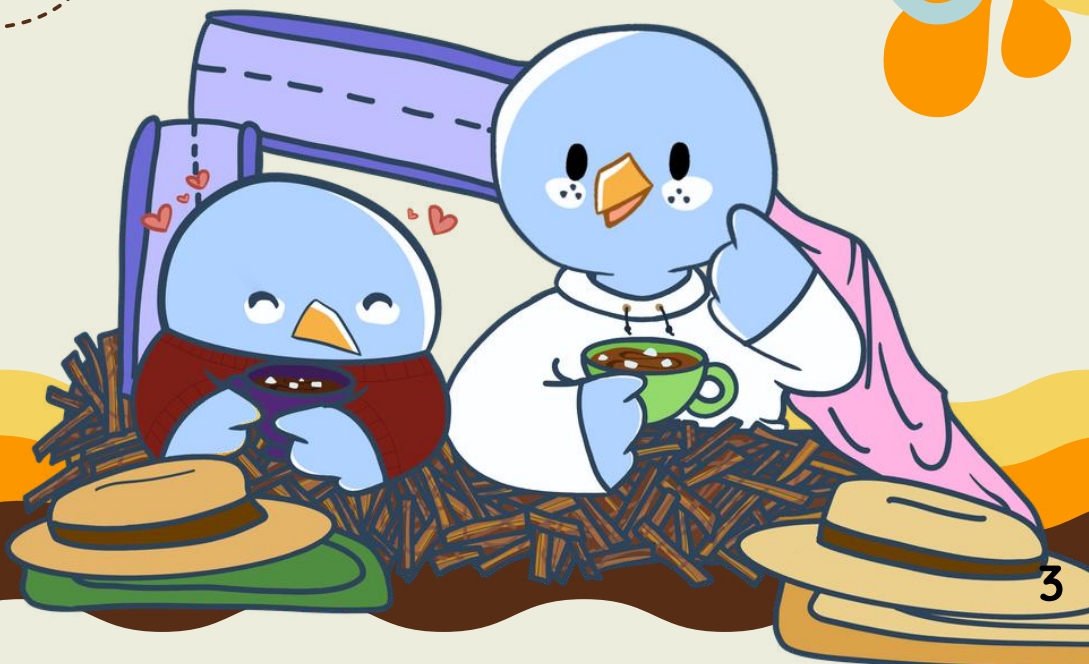
Build a Nest!

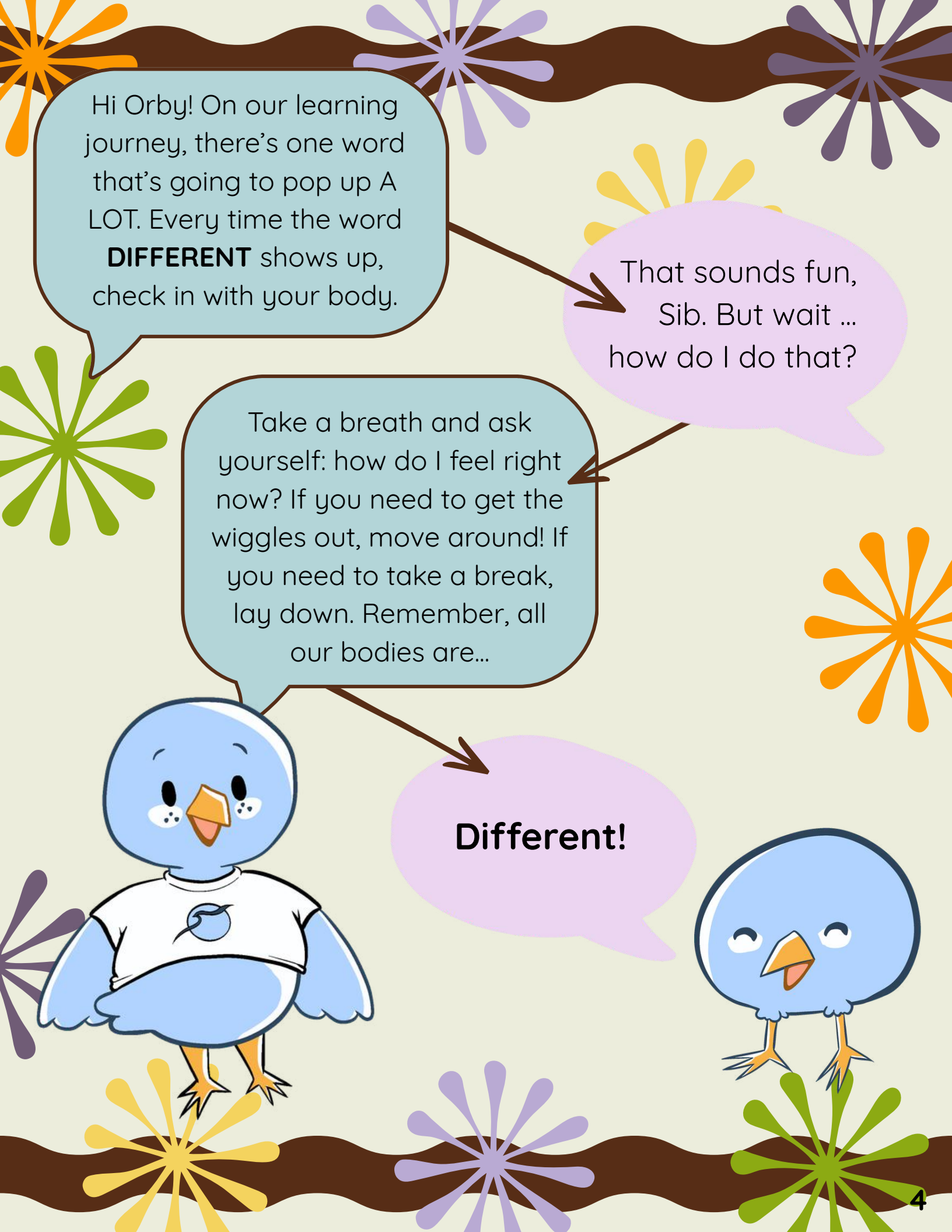
Everyone needs a safe space. Those who live with a disability know that what feels safe for many people, often doesn't feel safe for us. This is because many spaces aren't designed for our bodies. This is why building your own "nest" can be so calming and restorative.

TO BUILD A NEST, FOLLOW THE INSTRUCTIONS BELOW:

1. **Pick** a quiet spot where you can comfortably lie down. This can be a bed, couch, cozy corner, whatever you want!
2. **Gather** your favorite pillows and blankets. Find ones with textures you find soothing. Place them in your quiet spot (aka: your nest!).
3. **Decorate** your nest with comfort items. Weighted stuffed animals, a Rubik's cube, your favorite book. Even if you don't plan on using it, bring it along as a source of joy.
4. **Keep** water, a snack, medications, and pain management tools nearby. This way, you don't have to leave the nest!

Now, think about your OWN comfort items! Do you have a comfy sweater or a cozy blanket?





Hi Orby! On our learning journey, there's one word that's going to pop up A LOT. Every time the word **DIFFERENT** shows up, check in with your body.

That sounds fun, Sib. But wait ... how do I do that?

Take a breath and ask yourself: how do I feel right now? If you need to get the wiggles out, move around! If you need to take a break, lay down. Remember, all our bodies are...

Different!



WHAT IS DISABILITY?

By Jeanne

Ethan* is a young adult who often uses a walker. Ethan said: “When I was a child, I was told at church that everyone belongs. I believed that. But as I got older it got harder to believe. In youth group, I could not drive. I had to depend on other youth to give me a ride. Sometimes they forgot to pick me up. When we went somewhere together, the other youth would walk fast. I wasn’t able to walk as fast and I would get left behind.”

As peacemakers, we want everyone to belong but people with disabilities are often left out or left behind. To understand why that happens we need to understand disability.

WHAT IS DISABILITY?

Disability is caused by human limits and by a world that limits people.

We might be limited because we can’t walk. But we could also be limited because there is no ramp or elevator to accommodate a wheelchair. We might be limited because we can’t see with our eyes. But we could also be limited because words are not printed in Braille or spoken aloud.

We can help make our community open to people with disabilities by **removing as many limits as possible**. Removing limits helps everyone. For example, a wheelchair ramp can also be used for rolling luggage, carts, and baby strollers.

A lot of people are disabled. In the United States, 1 out of 4 adults have a disability.

People are disabled in many different ways. Some disabilities are visible. Other disabilities are invisible. We can’t always tell if someone is disabled just by looking at them. People may be extra sensitive to their five senses (loud noises, certain textures), or struggle to manage emotions and maintain focus. These are all examples of invisible disabilities.

Support needs for disability can change day by day. Sarah Werner works for Anabaptist Disabilities Network. She writes articles, book reviews, and teaches classes. Some days Sarah needs to use her wheelchair. Other days she can walk with her crutches. This is true for a lot of people with disabilities. The support they need changes. When you get to know a friend who is disabled, you learn what kind of support they need always, sometimes, or never.

We all have limits. There are some things we can’t do and some things we are good at doing. Each person is given gifts for the good of everyone. Each gift is different and plays an important role. We often don’t know what a person’s gifts are until we get to know them. When we meet someone, disabled or not, let’s slow down, be curious, and learn what gifts they have. We might be surprised!

We can all help each other find our place to belong.

PRACTICING SLOWING DOWN

By Mel

Just because someone's needs are different does not mean that they are abnormal. Disability is part of the human experience. **Ableism** is when people's differences are used against them and viewed as weakness, incompetence, or otherness. We can work to limit ableism by educating ourselves, being curious, and being patient for the sake of including everyone.

What we assume about people can appear in the way we speak to or about one another. If we use the term "disabled person," we draw more attention to the word disabled, and in doing so, imply that it is abnormal.

Try to use people-first language, like "a person who is disabled," or "person with a disability." This shifts attention back towards the individual, rather than a label. A disability can be part of a person's identity but it does not define them! Many people with disabilities have specific terms that they use to refer to themselves. **Always follow their lead on how they want to be addressed.**

It's also important to avoid problem-focused language. Notice the difference between these two sentences:

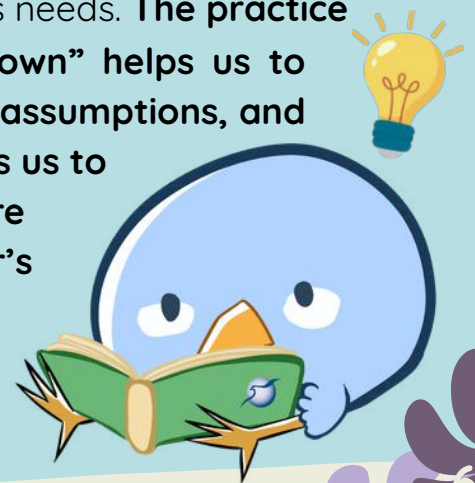
- "He can't eat much because he has Crohn's disease."
- "He knows how to manage his Crohn's symptoms with a specific diet."

The first sentence shines a light on the disability and depicts it as a negative. The second sentence highlights how this person has learned to live with their disability.

One of the easiest ways to help your friends with disabilities is to allow them time and space. **It's super important to allow time and space for people to ask for what they need, because it can be very hard to ask for help.** While you never want to assume what people need, slowing down can also give us the time to notice when others around us may want assistance.

Maybe a few of your friends want to play on the monkeybars during recess, but you notice that your friend who uses a walker seems disappointed. Your friend won't be able to play with you if you decide to do the monkeybars, so you ask whether you can all play basketball instead.

Notice how you made an alternative suggestion without drawing attention to your friend's needs. **The practice of "slowing down" helps us to avoid making assumptions, and instead, allows us to notice and care for each other's differences.**



ART ACTIVITY!

Have you ever seen a dog get the zoomies? Out of nowhere they race around super fast, doing laps around the room.

We can get the zoomies too! Our legs start bouncing, or our hands fidget. Maybe we're sitting still but it's hard to focus. This is our nervous system letting us know we need to find an outlet.

Big feelings like excitement or anger have to be released. Movement can be a helpful way to do so!

HERE'S A FUN METHOD TO RELEASE ALL THAT ENERGY:

1

Grab a piece of paper. The bigger, the better!

2

Get something to draw with – crayons, color pencils, paint. Make sure to have different colors. (Bonus points if you use finger-paint)

3

Go crazy!! Scribble, flick, swipe, brush, drip. Draw loops, slashes, circles, wiggles, switch colors. Let your hand move around the page without thinking or caring what it looks like.

4

Stop whenever it feels good to stop.

5

Reflect. Look at your art. What do you notice? Why did you choose the colors you chose? How does it make you feel?



A Letter of Encouragement

DEAR FELLOW PEACEMAKERS WHO LIVE WITH DISABILITY,

By Aliah

Let's take a deep, belly breath. Ready? BIG inhale . . . feel your belly grow and grow like a balloon. . . now hold . . . and BIG exhale . . . let that balloon deflate nice and slow. . . great job! You can pause here and take as many belly breaths as you need. We're in no rush.

My name is Aliah and I am the new editor of AGAPE magazine. I am also part of the disabled & neurodivergent community. I live with a few different disabilities, but to summarize: my head hurts a lot, my legs turn to jelly, and everyday chores like cleaning my room are absolutely exhausting! Have you ever felt like that?

All of our bodies are special with their own way of experiencing and processing the world. **We may not be the same, but that doesn't mean you're alone.**

In fact, I feel very honored to write to you because I know that I'm talking to someone who is very brave. Doctors appointments can be scary. Cars too loud, lights too bright. Sometimes people don't respect the space we need. And despite how hard we try, it's not always easy to find friends.

Unjust systems can make us feel like a puzzle piece that doesn't quite fit. Remember, this isn't true. Being different doesn't take away your right to belong. You are known. You are loved. You are valued.

Between us, when my head hurts real bad or I can't walk for days, I get this icky feeling. Like I'm doing something wrong or not trying hard enough. Over time, we can start to believe hurtful perspectives about disability. This can lead to low self esteem.

I once told a wise, old friend about this icky feeling & he gave me some really good advice. He said: **Treat yourself like honey.**

Now, what does that mean? Should I pour myself into a cup of tea? That sounds pretty silly! No, no. He meant something a little different.

Let's try this. If you can, find a spoon and pour a little bit of honey into it. Not too much. Now, taste it. Sweet, right? So bright and delicious. And that was just one spoonful!

You are just like a drop of honey. Even a small amount is more than enough. Remember your worth. Be gentle and patient with your body. Do we gobble up honey? Eat it by the bottle? No! We go spoon by spoon, bit by bit.

The slower we go, the more we savor. **Savor your sweetness and as much as you can, surround yourself with people who do the same.**

The Spoon Metaphor

By Aliah

Have you ever felt sad but told your family “I’m just tired”? Or maybe you wanted to read by yourself at recess but people kept interrupting? Communicating our needs isn’t easy. Disabled or not, it’s often hard to find the words. Metaphors can help those around us better understand our personal boundaries. One of my favorites is **The Spoon Metaphor**.

Imagine you began today with 10 spoons. Throughout the day, you give your spoons away. Getting ready for school? That costs 1 spoon. Socializing with friends? That costs 1 spoon. Homework, chores, family outings – each of these require a spoon.

Now, imagine you wake up tomorrow and instead of getting 10 spoons, you only have 5! Or maybe a task that took 1 spoon yesterday, takes 2 today. This is a common experience for people with dynamic disabilities. **Things like pain, exhaustion, and emotional ups and downs limit our amount of spoons, making it difficult to do everything we want to do.** With only 5 spoons, tough decisions have to be made. Do I spend my energy finishing my homework or taking a shower? I want to go to my friend’s house, but I don’t have any spoons left!

Whenever I have to cancel plans with a friend, I say “I’m all out of spoons, but let’s check in another day”. This is a way to express a personal boundary without diving into details that may feel too private or exhausting to share.

Imagining our energy level as spoons also helps us manage our daily lives and stop us from over working ourselves. Remember, you’re not lazy or anti-social or incapable. You just don’t have enough spoons today, and that’s okay!

COLOR IN THE AMOUNT OF SPOONS YOU HAVE TODAY!



Curiosity

By Sydney

From appearance to speech to body language, all of us are unique. Sometimes we share similar aspects and other times we are very different. A disability can be understood as a difference, and unfortunately perceived as a negative difference. However, we must recognize disability as another aspect that makes a person unique.

Curiosity is a part of being human. We truly are always looking for answers.

When we notice someone with a disability, we can become curious and want to ask questions to figure out what makes them different from “normal.” It is important to acknowledge that we do not need to know why someone has a disability nor what causes it. People with disabilities don’t owe us an explanation. It is up to that individual whether or not to share about their disability.

As a child growing up with a speech impediment, I would repeatedly be asked “Why do you talk so funny?” and “Why do you not sound “normal?”” Oftentimes, these questions really hurt me as a kid. They felt like there was something wrong with me. My normal is not accepted.

Even after many years of speech therapy, I still have a speech impediment and I’m proud of it. As I started working with kids and continued to receive these questions, I decided to use these natural bursts of curiosity as an opportunity for education.

When exploring our questions, here are some key things to keep in mind:

- **Disabilities are neutral:** Disability is not naturally something negative, but also not positive. For more information, visit [“Words Matter! Disability Language Etiquette”](#) (see citations)

- **Disabilities are normal:** One person’s normal is not the same normal as someone else’s. Educate that disabilities are normal. According to the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#), in 2023 1 in 6 people currently experience a significant disability worldwide. This is an estimated 1.3 billion people, representing 16% of our global population (see citations.)

Sometimes I would educate kids by stating how a speech impediment is similar to how we might speak the same language but pronounce words differently due to upbringing: tomato versus tomatoe, soda versus pop and speaking a different language at home.

- **Disabilities are not the same:** People might have similar disabilities, but they are not the same. Every day is a new adventure for all of us and, especially for someone with a disability. My speech impediment can be very different from another individual’s speech impediment and can also change depending on the day. Disabilities can often be affected from routine changes, emotions, environment, sleep, etc.

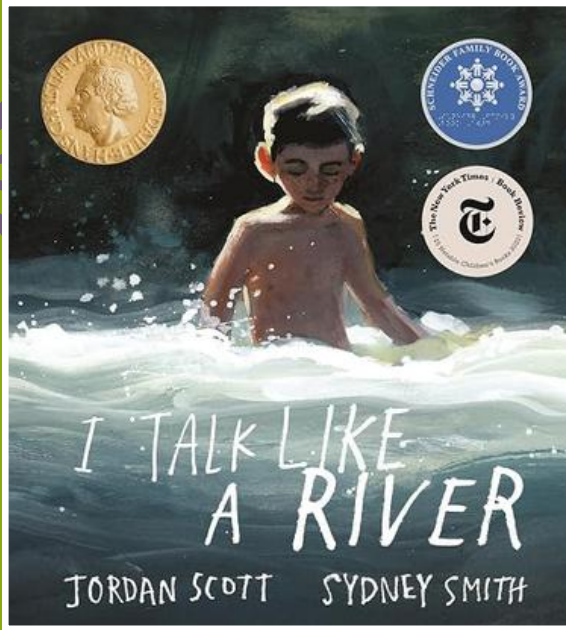
It’s okay to be curious. It’s okay to ask questions. But it’s most important to educate yourself and others on how to approach and advocate for disability justice. We are all unique and we can work together to make sure everyone’s uniqueness shines.

So what do you do if you have questions?

1. Ask a trusted adult who can educate and help you find answers.
2. Go to your local library and find books that discuss the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities. Try to find books that are written by people who are being described.
3. Before asking an individual directly about their disability, check if they are comfortable talking about it. Beginning questions with phrases like “Do you mind if I ask” or “If you’re comfortable, I’d love to know” can signal respect for personal boundaries and help create a safe space for conversation.



Book Nook



I Talk Like a River

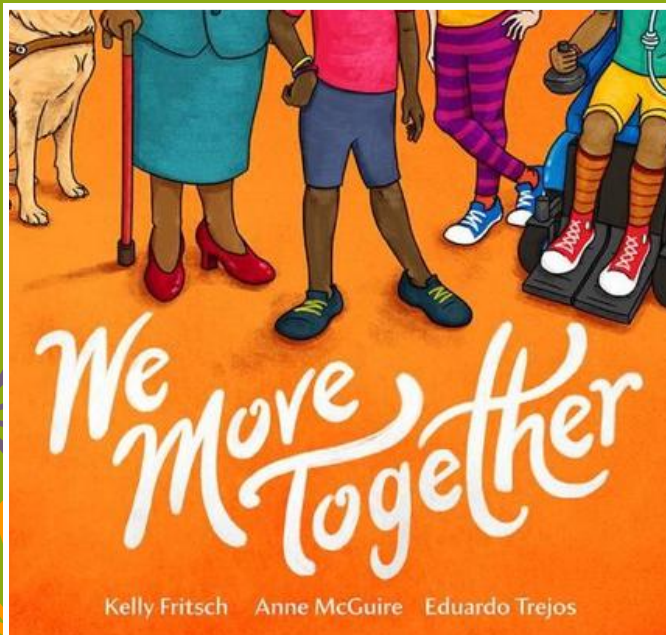
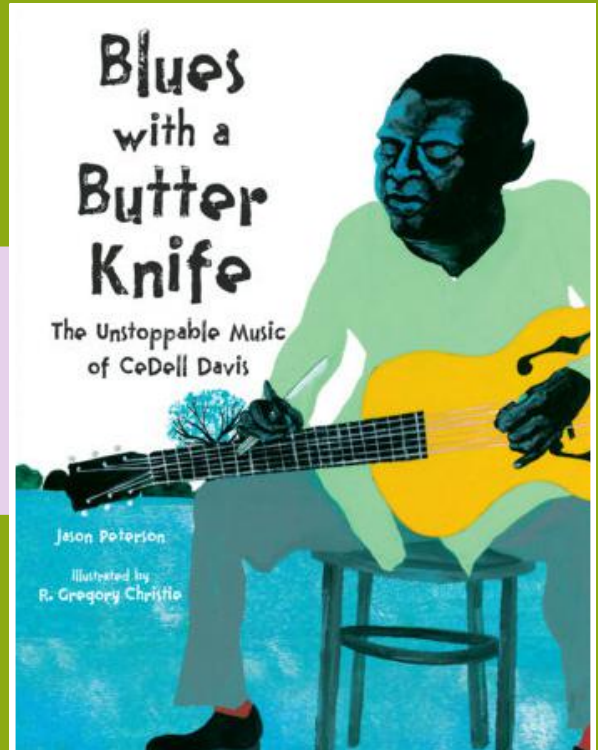
by Jordan Smith & Sydney Smith

Age: 4-8 years old

Blues with a Butter Knife

by Jason Peterson

Age: 7-10 years old



We Move Together

by Kelly Fritsch, Anne McGuire, & Eduardo Trejos

Age: 6 - 10 years old

Jesus Heals the Crowd

By Jeri & Marie



Have you ever learned about the healing miracles of Jesus? The Gospels are full of these stories- the blind man who can see, the lame man who can walk, the woman who stops bleeding, the short man in a tree, the children welcomed by Jesus. Wait, are the last two healing stories! They follow the same pattern as the previous stories - people who are on the outside of the crowd are invited to come to the center to meet Jesus. Maybe that is the miracle.

The healing stories go something like this. Jesus is traveling or preaching. A crowd forms eager to meet him. Someone with a disability or identity that experiences discrimination, an outcast, finds themselves at the edge of the crowd. Jesus notices them and invites them toward him. Jesus corrects the crowd for separating them. Jesus recognizes what they are experiencing and offers healing.

The Bible usually depicts this healing as no longer having the disability. I wonder if we are missing something when that's the only healing we notice. **What if the greater healing is in being known and welcomed?**

People find healing in being included in the experience and ministry of Jesus. People with disabilities are a part of the community of Jesus. **The miracle is injustice being noticed and named.** The miracle worker is an upstander. The healing is inclusion.

Let's consider how healing practices sometimes happen in church life. (Remember if you don't recognize your church in this example, it doesn't mean that it doesn't happen. For many people, Christian practices are defined by what is popular not by what is true.) In some churches, we may be told that people who have disabilities must be 'healed.'

Members may gather to lay hands over a person and pray for their healing. While this may seem like a good thing to do because you love your neighbors and don't want them to hurt, it can be an act of ableism.

How would you feel if you suddenly had a large group of people looking at you, touching you, and sharing your private struggles without asking?

The practice of laying hands may lead those who are disabled to feel unworthy, unwelcome in the church, or that something is wrong with them. Consent (permission) is very important and must always be respected.

You should never assume someone's relationship with their disability by praying over them without consent. **People with disabilities are made in the image of God.** Their disability is not a sign that they must be 'healed.' Of course, a person may still want to be prayed for by their church. The ritual of laying hands can be a good thing when consent is given.

So what can we do to make the church a place where those with disabilities are respected, known, and valued? How is being welcomed as you are a form of healing? How does community healing allow space for all?

We can start with changing the way we understand disability. Rather than understanding difference as a separation, imagine a kaleidoscope. As we change our perspectives, we notice new things!

Those with disabilities have a unique perspective, both in and out of the church. Maybe there are things that need to be changed to be more accessible- thank you for showing us how to include more people! We can also remind ourselves that having a disability is one part of who someone is.

We can aim to embrace who they are as a whole, rather than view them only as disabled. We can recognize that those who are disabled are already a part of the community of Jesus. And maybe the healing happens when the church, or the crowd, celebrates God's love for all.



Meet our Team

ALIAH



Aliah Fabros is the Children & Youth Peace Formation Organizer for OEP and serves as the Editor in Chief of AGAPE. She is a professor of writing at a university in San Diego. All these roles rely and resolve Aliah's commitment to human connection, change-making writing, and justice-informed teaching.

MARIE



Marie Benner-Rhoades is a co-Director at OEP and focuses on youth and young adult peace formation. She loves the ways neighbors care for one another on a daily basis - by sitting on front steps to chat or helping with garden chores - and in big moments by opening their hearts to one another.

VALERIE



Valerie is the Graphic Design intern at OEP. Val enjoys anything art, music, and traveling; she hopes to do more in the future!

SYDNEY



Sydney is a co-Director at OEP. For several years, she has worked as an educator. In her free time, she enjoys cafe-hopping, traveling and learning new languages.

JEANNE



Jeanne serves as Executive Director of the Anabaptist disability director. She is ordained in the Church of the Brethren and has a Master of Divinity degree. She has a passion for disability, advocacy, and inclusion and believes that the whole church benefits when everyone actively connects.

MEL



Mel is a professor of English Composition & Research at Point Loma Nazarene University, where she is also earning an MA in Writing. As a teacher and student with a dynamic disability, she has a deep love for Disability Pedagogy and finding new ways to foster empathy in classrooms.

JERI



Jeri is the Church of the Brethren Nonviolence Organizing intern at OEP. They are currently a student at Simpson College (IA) majoring sociology and social justice studies. They truly value education and aspire to be a college professor in the future.

CITATIONS & DESIGN CREDITS

"Words Matter! Disability Language Etiquette" n.d. National Education Association. <https://www.nea.org/words-matter-disability-language-etiquette>

"Disability" 2023. World Health Organization. March 07, 2023. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health>

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WAGGLES

Do you hear...
jingle bells?

Find out in
the next
Issue!

