

# Step Out of Your Disability Comfort Zone

By Lisa Lightner

I recently completed a program to become a Certified Special Education Advocate. In one class, we talked a lot about inclusion. The instructor used the phrase “Disability Tourist.”

A similar term, “Poverty Tourism,” involves touring an area of extreme poverty. The hope is that you walk away motivated to help change the world. But probably most people go home, make a donation and go on with their lives.

How many special needs parents have met a Disability Tourist? Even though I’ve only been immersed in the special needs community for 5 years, I’ve met dozens.

When your child’s disability is mentioned to someone, the person nods and says, “Oh, OK, I think someone I work with (insert any acquaintance here) has autism (or whatever your child’s condition).” A few other niceties are exchanged and you both go on with your day.

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## Comfort Zones

Are you a Disability Tourist? Do you know people with a disability, but they’ve never been to your home? Have you ever been on an outing with them or invited them to your child’s party or event? Do you think about including a person or family but then think that because of the disability in their household “they probably wouldn’t want to go”?

I’m asking Disability Tourists to step out of their comfort zone. Invite us. Include us. That’s all we’re asking.

As parents we are aware that our child may act up during movies, but we know to sit near the back and exit if we are bothering others. We just want a chance to get it right. There is a chance that my child may sit quietly through an entire film or be able to enjoy the whole party. It’s those small victories, those glimpses of normalcy that get us through and make it easier for the next person. Give us the chance to get it right.

## Going the Extra Half Mile

We understand that because of feeding issues, allergies, sensory issues or equipment, that to include us may mean a bit of extra work. We get that. We know we segregate ourselves at times. But we do it because it’s easier.

I’m willing to step out of my comfort zone if you are. Can we both go the extra half-mile? In the long run, it benefits all of us.

Ask your children if there is someone at school who is always being picked on or bullied. Is there a classmate that no one sits with at lunch or plays with on the playground? Encourage them to reach out and include that person.

Life should look like a Sesame Street episode — all races, colors, disabilities and everything else — all playing nicely together. Let’s get out of the TV and do it. mk



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