

Acceptance and belonging: the helpfulness of being in valued roles.

Jane Sherwin

Jane Sherwin is a Queensland based consultant who has been involved in the lives of people with disability since the late 1970s. She is well regarded for her teaching and writing and has worked in government and community services in a range of management and direct service roles. Jane has been involved in social change efforts, particularly through her roles with Community Resource Unit Inc (CRU), including as Director of CRU until mid 2007. Jane is a Senior Social Role Valorisation (SRV) Trainer, having participated in the teaching, learning and application of SRV since the early 1990s. Jane finds SRV theory helpful in understanding how society and human services work, and in thinking about how to progress issues for people with disability. Jane is also a member of the Australian & New Zealand SRV Group.

One of the strongest wishes that a parent can make for their sons and daughters, with or without a disability, is that they are happy and fulfilled in what they do and who they are with. This is at the core of wanting acceptance. Without acceptance, the pain of rejection is felt strongly by the son or daughter with a disability and by those who love them. Finding ways to protect against the likelihood of rejection and increase the possibilities of accepting relationships is important.

Feelings of acceptance come from being acknowledged as someone who is intrinsically worthwhile and/or having characteristics that are seen as worthwhile. This could be as big as being in a role that allows someone to contribute to society, or it could be as small (yet no less important) as being admired for one's way of being in the world. Belonging is such a fundamental human need, and being accepted brings a sense of belonging. The majority of people need and want to belong to all sorts of groups and places such as families, friends, neighbourhoods, workplaces, clubs, and interest groups. Belonging and feelings of deep acceptance are like being 'home' in a relationship. There is a sense of comfort within the relationship, and a sense of being safe and secure.

Acts of acceptance and their cousin, acts of tolerance, towards people who are marginalised, bring out the better qualities in each of us. These acts come from private thoughts and personal actions, but the benefits are more public: they lead to caring and compassionate communities. They lay judgemental thoughts and behaviours to rest. They bring peace between people.

Having a life of meaning and rich ordinariness is a central goal of SRV, and being in valued roles is one way that helps achieve this. The application of SRV principles helps us to assist ordinary citizens enact acceptance and tolerance.

How might valued roles encourage acceptance in the community? There are five things for family members and people with disabilities to think about.

1. *Acceptance comes from a changed perception about people with disabilities.* The deeply embedded prejudices about people with a disability come from stereotypes about people with disabilities. These stereotypes are the negative roles

that people with disabilities have been weighed down with throughout the ages. They include the stereotypes of children forever, worthless, useless, can't learn, sick, a drain on our society. Therefore, SRV helps us understand that we need to challenge the preconceived ideas that ordinary citizens have about people with disabilities. We can do that in two ways: firstly, don't reinforce the ideas by even unwittingly treating people as if they are children forever, worthless, useless, and so on. Secondly, we can do this by supporting people to be in valued roles that show people in a positive light.

Changing perceptions is called 'popping people out' by John McGough, an American man who has Down Syndrome. He says that when people see him and his Down Syndrome features, they expect him to be a certain way: like other people with that syndrome, to be placid, to like music and animals, to never grow up, to never have intimate relationships, to be a burden on the family. However, when people discover that he is a loved family member, a member of his local church choir, a talented artist who has exhibited and sold paintings, a part time worker at a local grocery shop, a best friend of someone who is also a musician, and a member of a band, John believes that they get 'popped out'. They expected one thing based on preconceived ideas and stereotypes; they discover another. This challenge and discovery is because John is in valued roles.

2. *Being in valued roles that are related to interests or talents reinforces the similarity between people, rather than emphasising what is different.* It follows then that it is helpful to assist the person to find roles that are truly authentic for them and which build on the gifts they bring to the world.

3. *Think roles, not activities.* If ordinary citizens see people being 'occupied', 'programmed' or 'minded' in the community, then they are likely to assume that that is all they can cope with, and that they need a special worker to be with them to do those things. This squeezes out the possibility of an ordinary citizen being in an accepting relationship with the person.

4. *Use ways that are typical, ordinary and valued to meet the needs of your son or daughter, or yourself.* Truly valued roles only occur in ordinary life. These are the roles related to home, work, relationships, study, hobbies, civic duties, and being generally out and about. Reflect on questions that start with 'How does anybody else of a similar age, gender and culture ...?' This will give clues to more specific strategies that assist someone to be in a valued role. So depending on what the desirable future of the person might be, the question could be such as: 'How does anybody else of a similar age, gender and culture tend to find flatmates?'; 'How does anybody else of a similar age, gender and culture typically spend a meaningful day?'; 'What are the range of valued ways that anybody else of a similar age, gender and culture celebrates their 18th birthday?'

5. *Pay attention to image.* The messages that people send to the world about who they are come from a variety of sources such as how the person looks, who the person spends time with, their possessions, and where and what they spend their time doing. This means helping people put 'their best foot forward'. This also means paying attention to those things that are likely to lead to rejection by others, such as poor social habits or an offensive smell.

SRV does not offer any recipes for acceptance. What it does do is help us think about those things that are *likely* to increase the possibility of acceptance and belonging. By paying attention to these things, it is likely to bring out the best in all of us: emphasising the characteristics of the person as a fellow human being with feelings, hopes, interests and gifts; assisting them to have access to better lifestyles; and bringing forth acts of acceptance in community members.

The citation for this article is:

Sherwin, J. (2008) Acceptance and belonging: the usefulness of being in valued roles. Families for change. 3, 7, 2-3