

Known for My Strengths Rethinking Our Introductions BY COURTNEY TAYLOR AND ERIK CARTER



COURTESY JESSI SOLOMON

Disability is a *natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society*. This simple statement is prominent within almost every piece of federal legislation focusing on people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Being part of a community is at the heart of what it means to flourish as a human. Yet the experiences and relationships that make up everyday community life remain elusive for far too many people with significant disabilities.

Although much progress has been made over the last few decades, many employers, community groups, congregational leaders, and others still struggle to welcome and weave people with disabilities into the activities and relationships that are part of life in community. They may have difficulty imagining a meaningful place for someone described as having Down syndrome or autism. They may be uncertain of what someone with a label of fragile X syndrome or multiple disabilities has to bring to their business, civic organization, synagogue, or neighborhood group.

Think about how we typically talk about disabilities. It is often in terms of what someone *cannot* do or struggles to do. Such a message has inadvertent consequences. For example, when an employer considers, “What could a person with an intellectual disability contribute to this business?” or a youth ministry leader wonders, “How do we include a teenager with autism in our programs?”—all they might have is an image of what a person with that particular label cannot do. That makes for a challenging introduction. It is difficult to envision a place in a community for someone only on the basis of a list of deficits. How we introduce people surely matters.

Study of Strengths and Flourishing

As part of the VKC UCEDD *Disabilities, Religion, and Spirituality Program*, we are in the midst of a project focused on reshaping such introductions. We have been conducting a statewide study focused on faith and flourishing in the lives of youth and young adults with intellectual disabilities and autism in Tennessee. One of the study’s aims is to identify the strengths these young people might have to share

with others in their community. The study is funded by the **Martin McCoy-Jespersen Discovery Grant in Positive Psychology**. Martin is remembered by his family and friends as “open, accepting, present,” whose “great purpose was to live a happy life” connected to others.

To identify strengths, we asked more than 450 parents to complete a short scale focused on enviable qualities of these youth and young adults. The Assessment Scale for Positive Character Traits (Woodard, 2009) includes 26 different statements, each addressing the extent to which their child shows characteristics like kindness, humor, gratitude, empathy, optimism, forgiveness, and courage.

Gathering this type of “positive” data has implications for fostering inclusion and community participation. What if we introduced young people to others by their strengths and gifts? Can we think of young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in this way? Findings from our study to date suggest their parents can see many of these assets.

Drawing from the hundreds of parents and caregivers who participated, consider this small sampling of findings:

- 94% of parents described their child as *happy*.
- 86% say their child had a great sense of *humor*.
- 85% of these young people were described as *thoughtful and helpful to others*.
- 85% said their child *shows kindness to others*.
- 85% of parents said their child *is thankful for life’s simple pleasures*.
- 75% of parents described their child as *courageous*.
- 70% said their child *keeps on trying even when things get hard*.

How many businesses would benefit from hiring someone with qualities like honesty, persistence, and optimism? How many faith communities can find a place for someone known for her gratitude, empathy, and kindness? How many neighbors would be eager to develop a friendship with someone who is funny, happy, and thoughtful?

Does describing people in light of their strengths make any difference? Consider these two introductions: (1) Meet John. He has an intellectual disability, he can’t really read, and he is going to need lots of help to get around. (2) Meet John. He has an incredible sense of humor, he loves meeting new people, and he enjoys learning new things. By the way, he has an unforgettable bear hug. Which John would you be more eager to meet?

Youth and young people with disabilities have wonderful strengths and gifts to share. Too often those potential contributions get overlooked. As we strive to equip communities to more meaningfully include people with disabilities, let’s not overlook the introduction. Leaders and members of all our communities must see people first in terms of the gifts they have to bring. ■

Information from this study will be made available through a practical guide. To receive a forthcoming practical guide, email courtney.taylor@vanderbilt.edu. Courtney Taylor, M.Div., is VKC associate director of Communications and Dissemination. Erik Carter, Ph.D., is associate professor of Special Education.