

Parents should not feel isolated when raising a child with disabilities

I was at the park with two of my three kids when I saw her. A woman, about my age, holding the hand of a little boy; he looked to be about 6 or 7.

I watched her lead him to the slide and help him climb the ladder, boosting him from behind as he struggled to hold onto the rungs. It was hard for him, the climbing, and she quietly encouraged him as she helped push him to the top. "You can do it. Almost there."

I watched him squeal with excitement as he slid awkwardly down the slide, then struggle to stand after he reached the bottom. He babbled a few happy, but unintelligible, sounds while his mother smiled and nodded, appearing to sincerely understand what he was saying.

My almost-3-year-old raced up the ladder behind the little boy, propelling herself effortlessly down the slide after him. "Mommy, look!" she shouted. The woman watched my daughter for a moment before turning away, a shadow of wistfulness briefly crossing her face.

As she walked away with her little boy's hand in hers, I wanted so much to say something, anything, that would let her know, I am one of you. I get it.



BY BETSY
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I wanted to tell her about my little boy-Scott is almost 5, and he, too, needs help climbing the ladder on the slide. And while my nearly 3-year-old daughter might talk a mile a minute, my Scott's words are few, far between, and the cause for celebration on the rare occasions that we hear them. I cried when, just last month, Scott held his shoes in the air and proudly declared, "Shoes!"

But Scott wasn't with me that day, and so, to her, I was just another mom at the park, with yet another kid who was passing hers up on the slide.

It can feel isolating, being mom to a kid with special needs. I remember when Scott was a baby, how I grieved as I watched the other babies in our playgroup pass him by. And when the playgroup moms shared

anecdotes about first words and potty training, I sat quietly, nothing to add to the conversation.

So yeah. I get it. I know that invisible line in the sand, the one that separates me from the "normal" moms. I don't want it to be there-my friends of typically-developing children would swear it doesn't exist-but it does. Because as much as they might love Scott, and as deeply as they might sympathize with the struggles he faces, they don't get it. It's impossible to get it until you've lived it.

And that's what I wanted to say to that woman at the park - I know what it's like. I understand. And in turn, I wanted so much to connect with somebody who understands me. But short of passing out a business card-"Betsy Swenson, Special Needs Mom"-I haven't yet figured out how to gracefully strike up that conversation.

Parenting a child with a disability shouldn't feel isolating, not when there are so many of us. But we don't wear identifying badges; we don't share a secret handshake. And so, when we see a child like our own in the park or at the grocery, we smile quietly. We understand one another, even if we don't say anything. I just wish the words were there.