

# Children's Museum exhibit allows one to enter the world of the disabled and find that they too need to be happy

By Elizabeth Findley  
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How would it feel to be like Jack and the Beanstalk and get a look into the giant's castle? People who have visited the Children's Museum can get an idea of what his desk top is like. Young children can even slide down the oversized slimline phone, crawl through the bridge between the lenses of his glasses on the desk's "blotter."

Before the movement to mainstream handicapped children into public schools, misconceptions and half-truths grew up around people with certain disabilities, giving the false impression that they, like the giant, belonged to a separate realm. Like the giant's kingdom this realm was imbued with mysterious and foreboding qualities.

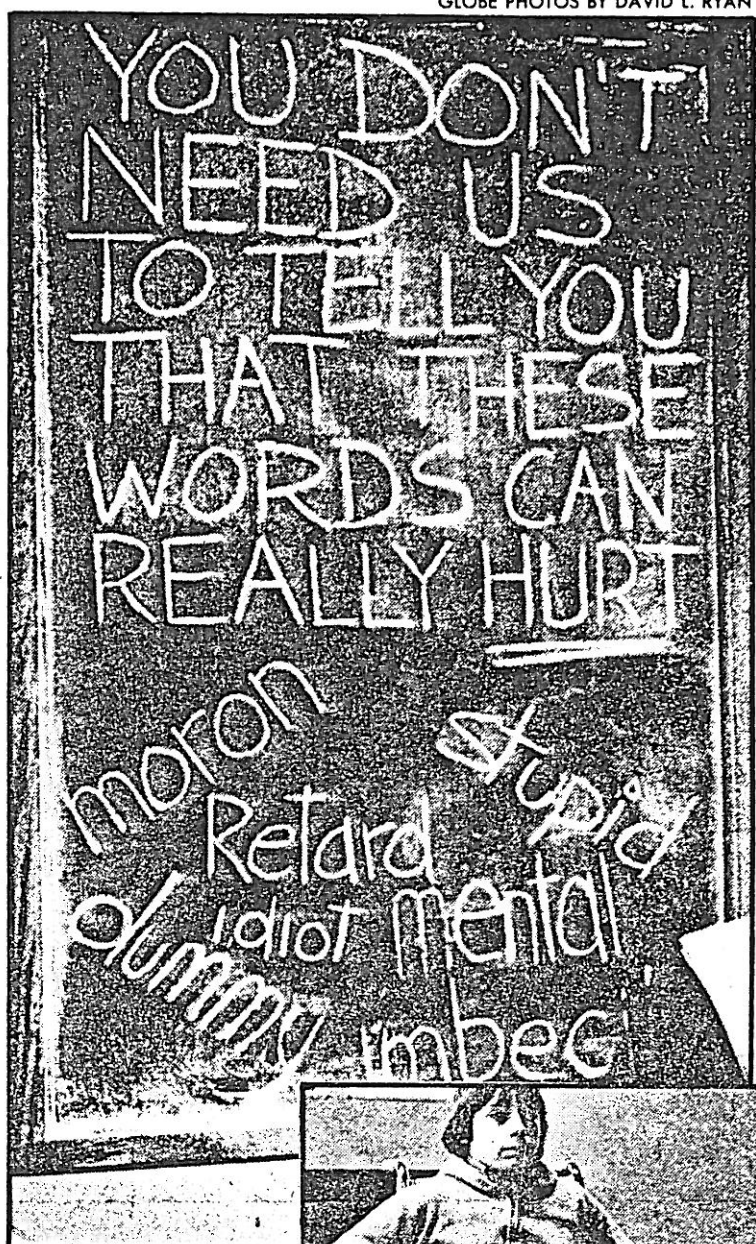
The possibility of becoming disabled is something we'd rather not consider. But like Jack, tiptoeing nervously up to the castle to look in the window, we sometimes find ourselves wondering what it would really be like if...

The "What if You Couldn't ...?" exhibit at the Children's Museum allows children (and adults) to enter the world of the disabled, play with their belongings, and find out that they have the same needs and capacity to be happy as anyone else. "What if You Couldn't ...?" was designed to help school children understand handicaps. A portable copy is being circulated to different museums by the Smithsonian Institute Traveling Exhibitions. A curriculum kit based on the exhibit is available for classroom use.

What happens when you visit "What if ...?" There's a set of phones you can pick up to find out what it's like to be hard of hearing. When you pick up that phone you don't get exactly what you might expect. There's one form of hearing impairment that sounds somewhat like a radio turned way down, but there's another one in which the "s" and "th" sounds are missing. The sounds that come through a hearing aid are not always clearer. They are just louder and metallic sounding with extraneous noises made louder, too.

Then, there's a game with "b" and "d" painted on a mirror with a chalkboard under it to show what it's like trying to write when letters keep reversing on you. Or you might play with colored disks and find that you remember their proper arrangement better if it's told to you than if you see it on a master sheet.

The object of this game is to show that people often learn



more quickly through different methods.

One little nook has hand puppets for kids to act out plays about how to deal with somebody who is sad or about making friends with someone the other kids joke about.

Each Wednesday morning, tours are given for groups of handicapped children, one staff person per child. Janet Kamien, associate director of the Visitor Center and coordinator of the museum's programs for the handicapped, has a born storyteller's ability to make ordinary things colorful.

Kamien believes that almost everybody is like everybody else in some ways and different in other ways. Her training sessions bring this point home. EXHIBIT, Page B62



\* Learning some of the problems faced by handicapped people are students at the Children's Museum's "What if You Couldn't ...?" exhibit.

GLOBE PHOTOS BY DAVID L. RYAN

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## EXHIBIT

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Everybody loves a good joke. So in one of her classes, she'll have the adults get up and tell their favorite joke or riddle in sign language.

●American Sign Language doesn't have the same grammar as English, but Signing Exact English does. "There are some jokes that belong to the hearing and some that belong to the deaf," Kamien says. "My deaf friends would be telling a joke and I couldn't understand what was so funny."

Many of the projects at the Children's Museum deflate fears. After the Wednesday morning tours, participants get a chance to ask questions and discuss their successes or failures. Another example is drawn from Section 504 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act, which states that no institution may deny the handicapped participant in "any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance."

The Children's Museum came out with a pamphlet called "Is There Life after 504?" With anecdotes drawn from experience and solid information, the pamphlet deflates fears that the problems and expense of making an institution accessible to the handicapped would be overwhelming.

Another example stems from people who feel ill at ease because they don't know how to act around a disabled person. Handicapped persons were interviewed to find out what they wanted others to know. From these interviews labels were made for the "What if . . . ?" exhibition telling how a disabled person might want to be treated in certain situations.

But the main fear these programs try to dispell is fear of the unknown. And disabled people are sometimes part of that unknown. Senses that have been painstakingly

trained to compensate for the loss of sight suddenly take on mysterious aura as if they were special powers given only to the blind. Many sighted people believe that the blind live in darkness. "And that calls up childhood fears of evil that may be abroad at night," Kamien says.

The exhibition also includes a wheelchair, an artificial arm, a prosthesis. "A wheelchair arouses both curiosity and fear in kids. They'd like to ask questions and try it out," Kamien says. "But they're afraid to becuae someone's already in it."

She tells the story of a boy who, from his own wheelchair, taught another child how to use the museum's wheelchair. Pretty soon a crowd gathered. One kid wanted to know, "What do you do when you get a flat tire?" "The wheelchair lost its scariness and became a bond between handicapped and non-handicapped, something to investigate, to share."