

SUPPORTING MIDDLE YEARS CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

A conversation with Erin Sheldon

Excerpts from an interview with Erin Sheldon,
parent of two and CEO of *Integration Action for Inclusion*



EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH ERIN SHELDON, PARENT OF TWO AND CEO OF INTEGRATION ACTION FOR INCLUSION

Can you describe yourself and your work?

I am the parent of two daughters with exceptionalities and the CEO of [Integration Action for Inclusion](#) (IAI), a grassroots parent organization that has worked for over 30 years to make Ontario more inclusive.

With a focus on educational inclusion and community living for all people who need extra support, IAI:

- Supports parents, teachers and school boards in developing individualized programs for students in inclusive settings
- Consults government regarding policies and practices relating to inclusion and
- Supports knowledge exchange

What was the motivation behind this work?

When my oldest daughter who has complex disabilities and does not speak was first entering school, I became interested in strategies to support her to participate in the regular classroom. This interest led to my return to school where I earned my Masters of Education.

Through my work with IAI, I quickly learned that our challenge to support my own daughter was a common experience across Ontario. Parents, Special Education Advisory Committees, and teachers were all eager to learn how to best teach and include all students.

How can your work be applied to middle years children with special needs?

IAI worked with Helen Sanderson & Associates (HSA), a consulting agency focused on person-centred change to learn how to put the student at the centre of planning. Their strategy which applies to school-aged children outlines the following four steps:

“ I QUICKLY LEARNED THAT OUR CHALLENGE TO SUPPORT MY OWN DAUGHTER WAS A COMMON EXPERIENCE ACROSS ONTARIO. ”

“DON’T PRESUME THAT ALL STUDENTS WITH THE SAME LABEL HAVE THE SAME SUPPORT NEEDS.

THE RIGHT SUPPORT LOOKS DIFFERENT FOR EVERY STUDENT.”

1. Start with what is most important to the student themselves. What needs to be in place for them to feel safe, accepted, and successful, on their own terms?
2. Separate what is important to them (from their own perspective) from what is important for them (from our perspective as the adults). Good planning supports what is important for a student while honouring what is important to them.
3. Explore the students’ interests and strengths to imagine the best possible future for them.
4. Work backwards from that long-term future to plan for today and tomorrow.

What advice would you give to people working with middle years children with special needs?

Don’t presume that all students with the same label have the same support needs. The right support looks different for every student.

What are you most proud of?

I am proud of how our work is amplifying the voices of even our youngest and most complex students.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

You can continue the conversation on the Knowledge Centre www.otf.ca/knowledge/promising-young-people

IAI ACTIVITIES

To discover what else Integration Action for Inclusion is up to, visit their website at www.integration-inclusion.com

SUPPORTIVE TOOLS

If you want to learn more, here are some supportive tools that I recommend:

- [Person-Centred Thinking Tools](#), Helen Sanderson and Associates and
- [Charting the LifeCourse](#), University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Services