

# 4 TIPS TO BUILDING **GREATER INCLUSION WITHIN YOUR**

## **SCHOOLS, BUSINESSES, & COMMUNITIES**

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Unite for Inclusion



## TIP ONE

### Get clear about what inclusion means to you

When we first started our nonprofit, Pathways for Exceptional Children in 2002, we were a small group of mothers having children with special needs. It became our lifelong cause to get them included in their schools and community. We began with inclusive after-school programs that were very successful. However, the only children attending had disabilities. We wracked our brains trying to understand why the programs were not becoming more inclusive!

One of our high school mentors finally opened our eyes. She noticed that we continuously taught about inclusion but our mission and messaging was filled with the label "disability." The mentor said she did not have disabilities so where did she belong in our organization?

Shockingly, we never thought about how the label "disability" was doing the exact opposite of what we really wanted. The label sent a very clear message that our programs were only for children with disabilities. We had inadvertently excluded the very people we wanted to become a part of our cause for inclusion. The label had created a barrier.

So, we began to experiment by using "children of all abilities."

When we became very clear about our cause, we started to get the results that we wanted. Currently 65-70% of our programs and services are children without disabilities. I have always said in my book "Include ME!" that if you want to be included, you have to become inclusive. I learned we had to think about our mission and messaging. We began to carefully consider the words, videos, and photographs we use. It's important to get very clear about what YOU want and make sure everything you do aligns with your cause.

## TIP TWO

### Focus on changing people's hearts

There is no question that civil rights laws are vital to gaining equal access and opportunity. However, we must be careful not to become too dependent on law for change. One of my favorite quotes from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was, "I want to become the white man's brother, not his brother-in-law." Dr. King understood the value of authentic inclusion and the dire need to focus on changing the hearts of people. He dreamt that someday his children would be included because people "wanted to" not because they "had to." His teachings taught me a valuable lesson; you cannot legislate a person's heart. I devote an entire chapter to this in my book, "Include ME!."



There are many facets to inclusion, but in my experience getting more leadership in the trenches to change the hearts of people is absolutely essential. Shedding labels and increasing awareness by sincerely hearing, seeing and validating each other is the first step.

It's just as important to give people a call to action and specific things they can do to apply authentic inclusion. We recruit volunteers in our community to help with coaching, mentoring, and instruction. People often report that they become addicted to it. As people learn to become more inclusive, they begin to feel more included. There is no down side to inclusion. If we engrain inclusion into the hearts of people, not only will inclusion happen at a faster pace, but the chances of it remaining a permanent part of the fiber of your community is far greater.

“I want to become the white man’s brother, not his brother-in-law.”

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



## TIP THREE

### Be an example for the next generation

The most important thing we can give our children is the power of an example. In the first chapter of my book, “Include ME!” I talk about the first time I took my son, who had multiple disabilities, to play soccer. We were asked to leave the soccer field because my son didn’t “fit in” with the other players. My son was four years old and the coach felt he belonged with Special Olympics or should play with other children with disabilities.

I refused to give up and walked over to a field with another coach. I pleaded with him to let my son play with the other kids, even if it was for just a few minutes. The kids on the field jumped at the chance and for the first time my son played soccer!



There was not a person on that field that wasn't transformed as a result of the experience of inclusion. Shortly after that, the same coach and players started a soccer team for children with special needs that progressively evolved into a team that was inclusive of all children.

Nineteen years later that same coach is still running our inclusive soccer programs. He has trained hundreds of children about inclusion and recruited other coaches to join us in developing inclusive teams in other sports.

If you think of the contrast between the two coaches that first day on the soccer field, they modeled the exact opposite things. One was inclusive and the other exclusive. What did their example teach the children on the two fields?

Our children will be our future legislators, teachers, coaches, CEOs, and leaders. What kind of example are you setting? Are you handing off the baton to the next generation that leaves a legacy for inclusion? Children do what they see. Be an example of inclusion.

## **TIP FOUR** Search for inclusion in the right place

As a society we are always reinforcing the concept that in order to feel included you must "fit in" or earn the acceptance of others. We learn that we will be included if we are thin, beautiful, own a house or car, have lots of money..... the list goes on. Many times we are led to believe that we will find a sense of belonging when we climb high enough up a cultural ladder or move within society's hierarchies that make us feel superior or inferior to others.

In the process of chasing the external to feel included; we lose who we are internally.



Instead, let's reverse the process and begin finding inclusion internally within ourselves.

When I work with the children of all abilities, the peer pressure they face daily to conform is relentless. I am constantly asking them: 1) What do THEY want, 2) What are THEIR passions, and 3) What do THEY need to do to develop a sense of belonging within their own skin.

Incredibly, as the children learn to include themselves, they naturally begin to include others more. You cannot give what you do not have. I constantly reinforce the concept that the more inclusive you become, the more you will be included.

Inclusion is similar to the laws of science. Inclusion is as predictable as Newton's Law of Gravity. In the same way as what goes up must come down; as you learn to accept and include yourself, you will begin to include others. As you begin to include others, you will be included more. You do not find inclusion by losing who you are, but by finding who you are and sharing it with others.



"As you begin to include others, you will be included more. You do not find inclusion by losing who you are, but by finding who you are and sharing it with others."

- Melinda Jennis

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melinda Jennis



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best seller in  
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categories!  
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Melinda Jennis is fondly known as the "Include ME!" lady. She has over 20 years of leadership experience and a deep passion for diversity, equity, and inclusion. In 2002, because of her son with multiple disabilities, she founded a nonprofit called Pathways for Exceptional Children. She has worked tirelessly to implement sensitivity and inclusion training in schools, businesses, recreation and community activities. She trains 5,000 people annually. Join **Unite for Inclusion** to get free trainings at [UniteforInclusion.org](http://UniteforInclusion.org)

