

# READY, SET, PLAY...

for Children With Disabilities

# Remarkable

by Kathryn H. Lavin, MSW, Executive Director of Lekotek and AblePlay

As I sit taking in the beautiful sunshine and warmth on this extraordinary mid-November, autumn day in Chicago, I am reminded that soon – too soon – our sidewalks and streets will be covered in that remarkable substance: snow.

Snow has always been remarkable to me. In addition to harkening days of yesteryear, when a child growing up in the Northeast would think nothing of grabbing her sled or skates and heading out in all types of snow to frolic with her friends, snow has two very extraordinary characteristics. These components at first seem diametrically opposed, yet when working in concert with each other, create the remarkable beauty of snow.

The first is the component of the individual snowflake. When you pause to think that each and every snowflake is unique and that no two ever are the same, the impact of that knowledge can be mind-blowing. In a way, the same can be said of children, or really, of all people. No one person is the same as another. Not even identical twins are the same.

When we are first introduced to people with disabilities, it is easy to think that children with similar diagnoses are the same. As a result, we are likely to make generalizations that are simply not true. “All children on the spectrum are boys with behavior issues,” or “All children with Down Syndrome are always as sweet as pie.” (As a mother of a 20-year-old with DS, I can attest that my daughter is not any sweeter than my other two “typically developing” children.)

When a child with special needs comes into your establishment, it’s important that you remind yourself that this child is as exceptional as a snowflake and therefore, what may have been interesting to one child with a

similar diagnosis, may not be interesting to another. Just as you must look closely at a snowflake to see how it is unique, it is important to look closely at each child to find those characteristics that make her “one of a kind.” Furthermore, it’s important to note that each way in which a child plays is diverse, and every child can play with your product in many ways, making each playful experience remarkable.

This brings me to the second characteristic of snow – the impact of the many. When you have more than one snowflake and you add a dose of moisture, you are left with a remarkable blanket of snow. Let’s not underestimate the impact of many individual snowflakes. First and foremost, snow gives us pause. Literally. When it snows, we slow down – our driving, our walking, and, if we are lucky, our lives. We are impacted visually with cascades of white. We are touched by the cold, and again, if we are lucky, we are blessed with the silence of the snow.

Yet these characteristics of the snow would not be possible without the collaboration of the many.

In the “disability world” we like to remind people that despite individual characteristics, we are more alike than different. That, at the end of the day, we are all human, seeking similar things: love, joy and meaning. Our ability to play and find joy in play is a common denominator, especially when we make play accessible for children of all abilities. Yet this cannot happen without the efforts of many individuals, like yourself, working together in concert to create the impact. And so, a question remains: like the powerful influence of the blanket of snow, what remarkable things are we able to accomplish together to provide all children with the ability to play?

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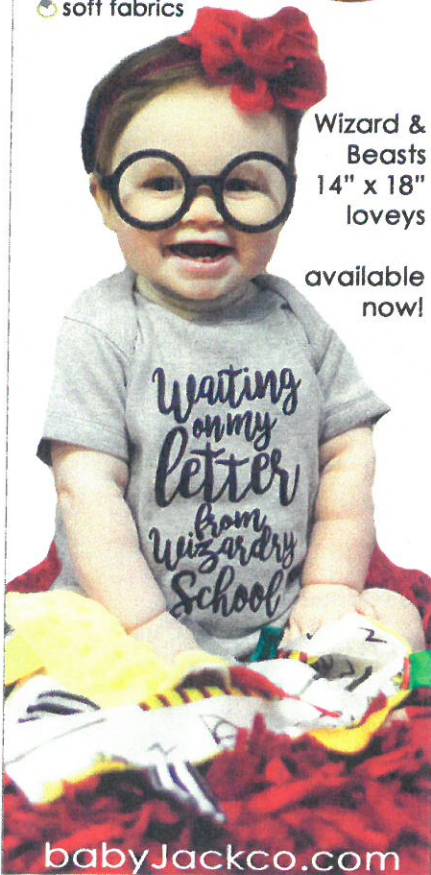
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