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One of the more interesting things about being a part of the 2017 2018 class of partners in policymaking was to learn about what it was like to raise a child with a disability from a parent's perspective. Before partners, I had only my experiences from which to draw. One of the more interesting and common refrains I heard from parents over the six-month period was how isolated and to a degree unsupported parents felt. When I heard their stories, it caused me to reflect on my own life. I soon discovered that both parents who care for their children and young adults, and the young adults or children that have the disabilities share a lot of the same experiences.

I was once a kid I know perfectly well from a different perspective what that isolation and loneliness can feel like. I continue to feel that way, until I was invited to do things with my high school peers that didn't have disabilities. Everything from: flight football choir and German club helped me not only feel less isolated but was the first step in allowing me to help build interpersonal connections that I've carried through beyond my high school years it also helped break school stereotypes from people who hadn't yet been exposed to a lot of folks with disabilities. This wouldn't have happened however, had I not had parents that allowed me to step out of my comfort zone and try to make friends with peers that didn't have disabilities. It can be difficult for parents to feel that it is okay to take risks with your child that has disabilities. In my experience however, it was totally worth it.

If parents ever feel that they have difficulty envisioning their children or young adult participating in those activities, I would encourage them to reach out to adults that have disabilities. They can often be a great resource for parents with young children or teenagers. There is also no shame in asking for assistance from a clinical mental health practitioner if the stress of parenting ever becomes too great. I cannot tell you the amount of time that I was helped as a kid by having an empathetic listener across from me to help process the feelings I was feeling at the time.

Parents have the capacity to be real trailblazers in their community. They have the power to reshape their community's perception of not only their son or daughter but of people with disabilities in general. This could be done by fighting for inclusive education, the right to "real employment", or just the right to be free to ride a bus to the movie theater in your community. I'm asking parents to be as bold and courageous as they can possibly be to ensure that another generation of folks with disabilities don't have to feel isolated and alone but rather empowered and capable.