

History Note – August 2015: Parent movement helped set the stage for changes

by [Access Press Staff](#) // August 10th, 2015



The parent movement helped countless people.

The parent movement helped set the stage for the larger disability rights movement which led to passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. This history is excerpted from a history of the Partners in Policymaking program.

The vast majority of children and adults with intellectual disabilities lived in public institutions, hidden from view. Residents lived in filthy, dangerously overcrowded conditions under the care of overworked, often abusive caregivers. They typically received inadequate medical care and few, if any, educational opportunities. Individuals with intellectual and other developmental disabilities were viewed with pity or fear.

Many parents were made to feel ashamed of their children with disabilities and were often blamed for causing their children's disabilities. Medical professionals routinely told parents to place children with developmental disabilities in institutions and forget about them. Parents who rebelled and kept their children with disabilities at home were instructed to place the child face down in a stroller when out in the community so that members of the public would not

be offended. There were no community supports. Few education programs existed because it was assumed that children with disabilities were unable to learn.

By the late 1940s, many parents of children with disabilities had become frustrated and angry over conditions in institutions. Unfortunately, parents with limited resources had no real alternatives to institutional care because no supports were available in local communities. Parents responded by coming together to demand access to education and community supports for their children. They organized formally in 1950 when 90 parents from across the United States traveled to Minneapolis to participate in the first national conference for parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. What is now The Arc, a national parents' organization, was created at the conference.

Throughout the 1950s, representatives of the parent movement collectively pushed for legislative change, initiated and pursued critical court challenges and media exposés, and pressed for their children's educational rights. They urged policymakers to think differently about people with disabilities and pass legislation that would ensure that children with disabilities received an appropriate education, provide access to vocational training, expand research into the causes and treatment of intellectual and developmental disabilities and educate society so that children with disabilities would have more opportunities to become accepted, productive citizens.

By the 1970s, the advocacy efforts were paying off. Conditions in state institutions were improving. Community services, educational and employment opportunities were emerging. New, more supportive legislation was being discussed. Legislators, policymakers and service providers were finally beginning to question the belief that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities were unable to contribute to society in a meaningful way.

Today, parents continue to play a critical role in obtaining full community integration and inclusion for their children with disabilities.

Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota's disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at access@accesspress.org or 651-644-2133 if you have questions. The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities.