

**NYC Task Force For Quality Inclusive Schooling**  
“Creating an Inclusive Environment for All Students”  
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Parents and Teachers ... A Natural Union

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**Presenter:** Ellen McHugh

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Task Force for Inclusive Education

Education Subcommittee of OMRDD

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**Presenter's Background:**

Mrs. McHugh is the lead coordinator of Parent to Parent of NYS, NYC Region. Parent to Parent of NYS is a non for profit statewide organization that provides support to and facilitates a connection between parents of children with disabilities. Mrs. McHugh is the mother of three boys, the eldest having a severe-profound hearing loss. Throughout his schooling, Mrs. McHugh kept him in the mainstream classroom included with the rest of his peers.

**Workshop Objectives:**

- To educate parents about the role of teachers.
- To educate teachers about the role of parents.
- To educate both parties about communication.
- To suggest successful approaches for communication.

**Topical Outline:**

- Introduction and Ellen's personal background information
- Diagnosis of her son's disability and difficult communication with professionals in this area
- Obstacles in enrolling her son in school, communication with teachers, and the inclusion environment
- Importance of communication, understanding the other party's perspective and legislation
- Her son's condition today and conclusion regarding inclusion

**Content of Session:**

Mrs. McHugh began the session by telling her story. Mrs. McHugh was brought up as an Irish Catholic whose parents had immigrated to America from Ireland. She was married five years when she became pregnant with her first child. The pregnancy was a normal one and she gave birth three weeks past her due date. On June 1<sup>st</sup> 1977, she gave birth to a baby boy via a caesarian section. The baby had an Apgar score of 2, presented with heart, liver, kidney and lung problems and within five hours he developed eczema. The baby spent time in the ICU during which he had fever-induced seizures as well. He was then sent home after two weeks.

When she returned home with her baby, Mrs. McHugh suspected that her son was having trouble hearing. Among other instances, she noticed that when her two large dogs would bark, her son would pay no attention and did not respond in any way. She took her son for testing and the doctors insisted that nothing was wrong. Mrs. McHugh shared how she had to learn the medical lingo to understand the doctors. She felt that the doctors were insensitive and they blamed the parents for any delays. This took place before the period of mandatory audiology screening. At two and a half years, her son was finally diagnosed with severe-profound hearing loss in St. Francis de Sales School. However, the audiologist recommended that she send her son to a school that used both sign language and oral communication because her son did possess some vocabulary.

After receiving the diagnosis, Mrs. McHugh did not know who to turn to. She called a phone operator to obtain the numbers of agencies that could be of help. Coincidentally, the operator who had a relative with a hearing loss was able to put her in contact with the New York League for the Hard of Hearing. Mrs. McHugh was surprised to find support through a random phone operator rather than professionals. Later, when she applied for her son to attend the local Catholic school, she was very astonished and upset when they did not accept him saying “we don’t do these kinds of children here”. Afterwards, she contacted the Committee on Handicap (COH) and was surprised that the personnel were kind and helpful. In fact, COH was surprised at her negative approach and attitude, which resulted from her past experiences with her child. She felt that professionals just judged her son and did not want to deal with her. Mrs. McHugh went on to enroll her son in PS 204 where he developed some simple language conversation because he was in a hearing environment. The staff there was very accommodating but at

the same time realistic and taught Mrs. McHugh that if there's a standard, it must be kept. Mrs. McHugh's son prospered in this environment where he made friends, joined clubs, joined the baseball team and had good times like all other children. Mrs. McHugh later enrolled him into the High School of Telecommunications, Art and Technology.

Mrs. McHugh stressed the importance of both parents and teachers making an effort to understand one another. She explained to the teachers in the group that parents might have years of emotional baggage before their child enters kindergarten. On the other hand, she related that one of her most important lessons was when her son's second grade teacher explained to her that there is a standard in a classroom that must be upheld and the rules must be followed. Although parents of children with disabilities may expect special treatment at times, it is important to be realistic about inclusive classrooms and that the teachers have other children to teach too. In addition, Mrs. McHugh encouraged parents to speak up for themselves and their needs. When Mrs. McHugh's son was born, early intervention was not yet established, but because people experienced hardships and adversity, they approached government officials and changed legislation. Additionally, she urged the teachers and professionals to be helpful and resourceful to parents who may be feeling lost and looking to them for assistance.

Mrs. McHugh related that although her son received much therapy throughout the years he still has a language delay. However, she accredits the language that he does possess to being included in a regular classroom with typical speaking children. After completing high school, Mrs. McHugh's son went on to attend Gallaudet University because he wanted to be with people like himself. Gallaudet University is the only all-deaf college that gives its own university degree independent of any other university or

institution. At twenty-nine years old, Mrs. McHugh's son currently lives in Frisco, Colorado where he works in a Denver Starbucks. He has toured much of the world and 47 of the U.S. states and has never had a problem obtaining a job. In the past he has worked as a bartender, a paver and a contractor. He has greater expectations for himself and tells his mother that he is not planning to get a "real job" until he is thirty years old because he has a long time to live. Mrs. McHugh's parting lesson for parents was to raise their children as well as they can and give them the opportunities to prosper. In her situation, this entailed having her son attend an inclusion classroom where he flourished and gained vocabulary.

**Relevance to Inclusion:**

Mrs. McHugh's presentation was relevant to inclusion since her son attended an inclusion classroom and benefited from the speaking students in his class. In addition, Mrs. McHugh gave to the audience several important tips in improving the parent-teacher relationship in such situations. She advocated for inclusion environments but stressed the importance of communication and understanding on both sides.

**Goals, Concerns and Issues for Future Work:**

Mrs. McHugh's goal is to see that permission is given to both parents and teachers to take a chance, experiment and to fail sometimes. She wants to see that people will have room to move around and not be "stuck in a mold". She expressed her concerns that parents should have an array of options open for them and their children so that they can choose what they feel is best for them. In addition, Mrs. McHugh mentioned the rising issue of parent involvement and City Council was considering a proposal to give

parents who three hours per quarter to leave their workplace and to go to their child's school.