

Equity Today: The Region VIII EAC Podcast Episode 104 – Coping With Disability and Bullying

The Region VIII Equity Assistance Center at Metropolitan State University of Denver is guided by its vision to provide, upon request, technical assistance, training, and staff development for school boards, school districts, tribal education agencies, charter schools, and other responsible government agencies. We strive to promote equitable education opportunities and access for all students. We seek to improve equity, access, and participation and high quality, research-based opportunities for all students. We work to reduce disparities between and among groups where they may arise.

Tyler: Hello, and welcome to another episode of Equity Today, the Equity Assistance Center Region VIII podcast. I'm Tyler, and I'm sitting here with Jake Austen who is another student working here with me in the EAC.

Jake: Hey guys, what's up?

T: And today, we, since you know, we're both students we can't speak very specifically in terms of what the, how the office works with these things, but I recently broke my foot and decided it would be good to a little sit down talk about living with any degree of disability. Um, you have some experience with this, what's your background?

J: Yes, yes I do. Um, I was born with cerebral palsy, it effects my right side. It was caused, right before I was born actually, my mother's appendix ruptured. The theory is that the poison from her appendix cut off the oxygen to my brain-

T: Oh my god.

J: - yeah, oh my god is right! For an unknown period of time, that caused some brain damage on the left hemisphere of my brain, which as I'm sure some of you know, controls the right side of your body. So I, now as a result, walk with a limp, as Tyler can attest to, and have limited mobility, I guess you could say in my right arm and hand, and I also have optic nerve damage from that incident as well, which causes my vision to be correctable only to about 20/50, 20/60, somewhere in there.

T: OK. Not blind, but you can't get it perfect.

J: Yeah, not blind, but I can not uh, that prevents me from getting a regular driver's license.

T: Oh really?

J: Yes, yes.

T: Well yeah. So, from my point of view, like I said, I just broke my foot-

J: Yeah, yeah.

T: - and I'm gonna be, you know, back up and running within six weeks, but it's just been, uh-

J: An eye opening experience for you?

T: Exactly! And you know, um, I could have theoretically tried hopping, um, I just had never thought of trying to see what it was like to operate without -

J: Without both feet available.

T: Yeah, and it's just crazy watching like, taking showers is a task now. And carrying beverages is hard because they spill everywhere, because you don't have...

J: And everything takes longer, too. You have to slow down a lot.

T: Yeah. Anything, getting dressed, taking a shower, anything. Anything requires twice as much time to actually-

J: - do as it used to.

T: And yeah. And like I said, it's been a very eye opening experience. So what's kind of been your perspective you know, since you've lived this from day one?

J: In some ways, actually in a lot of ways, I'm glad I've lived with this from day one. Because I don't know any better.

T: Mmhmm.

J: And I don't have anything to compare it to like you do Tyler, and therefor, I don't often sit there and go, "God I remember what it was like when I could do this this fast," and I've never been able to drive, so I can't sit there and go, "gosh, I remember what it was like when I could just get in the car and drive to the store."

T: Yeah.

J: So, for me, it's forced me to figure out new ways to do certain tasks, um, it definitely increases your patience level because it just takes longer to do stuff. And it also to me has made me, not just more sympathetic to others, but more empathetic as well. I can very easily put myself in someone else's shoes mentally and kinda look at the world through their perspective, and that is an ability that I have that I don't think I would have if I hadn't been born with CP, that's short for cerebral palsy as I said earlier. So, in a lot of ways, my disability, in my opinion has

been a blessing in disguise. I mean there were some hard times obviously, especially growing up, with kids making comments and asking very inappropriate questions, and you know, and, it kind of gives you a tougher skin as they say. And it makes you stronger to go through other situations in life because you have this background dealing with such an in some ways a limitation but in some ways, a gift I guess. I had one coworker of mine one time call it my gift. And that was very touching, and in some ways I can see where that came from.

T: Totally.

J: It's been hard, it's been interesting, it's been fulfilling, it's also been great, because there have been times that I have overcome things that people said that I could not do, and it's wonderful to kind of just feel very proud of myself and prove people wrong, and that's one of the best thrills in the world. So it's been good and bad.

T: Totally. I um, yeah, like I was saying, you know, like doing things like taking a shower. Now when I take a shower, I like pat myself on the back and it's like "good job, you actually did this thing!"

J: Right, right, and you got it on your own without anybody's help.

T: Yeah, you know, and that's such...

J: Gives you a feeling of self-accomplishment.

T: Yeah, where independence when you're able-bodied is good but kind of...

J: You take it for granted.

T: Yeah, exactly.

J: And I think you appreciate it a lot more.

T: That's very true. And I don't know, I've been talking with a lot of people, how, I guess like I said, my situation is temporary, so, but I think even in permanent situations, it sounds like you've done this where, it would only be a tragedy or a waste if you didn't learn from it or grow from it.

J: Yes.

T: Which seems like such, I, it's an important step for anything in life, physical, or emotional thing that happens.

J: And you know Tyler, I think this will have a permanent effect on you as well because now you permanently have this new outlook that you didn't have before, and it's not something that you're going to lose even when you're able to walk without your boot and crutches, so.

T: Yeah, it will absolutely stick with me. And, I guess trying to bring it back around to the EAC as much as we can, when you were in elementary and middle school, what did the people around you do right and what they-

J: Do wrong?

T: -yeah, not do right.

J: OK, um. The teachers, I'll start with what they did right. My first couple years in school, and I was actually just mentioning this to the administrative assistant Amber Mozet. The first couple of years of school, they would sit the kids down at the beginning of the year, with my consent, with my parents' consent, and explain to them, what was wrong, why it was wrong, and explain to them that I was still a normal kid, that I should be treated as such.

T: Yeah.

J: And for the first couple of years of school when they did this, I didn't have problems with kids putting me down or making fun of me, or not wanting to be friends with or socialize with me.

T: Sounds like because it wasn't ambiguous, they knew exactly what it was.

J: Right. Right. Right. It wasn't, I don't know. You weren't afraid of it. You weren't intimidated by it. However, as elementary school went on, I can't remember the reason for this, but they stopped sitting the kids down at the beginning of every school and explaining what the problem was. And maybe this is because, some of the kids would go with me from one grade to the next...

T: They assumed it was accounted for.

J: Right, right. And they didn't feel it was necessary. And unfortunately, in my opinion, in retrospect, it most certainly was. Second grade and up is when I started to experience kids saying things, doing impersonations of the way I walk or the way I held my arm, various things. Name-calling, that started around then too. The teachers always, when they found out about it, they handled it, um, very well, they would always, the perpetrators would be punished, and it would stop. Um, what I did not like is, despite the kind of bully-proofing that goes on in schools, kids are still bystanders. And they really don't often stand up for each other. And I really seldomly had a kid in my class or someone walking down the street stand up for me when they saw me being made fun of, and I don't...what I do hate to say, I think it's

great all the stuff the EAC does, in bully prevention, but it will always be there. It will always be a part of society.

T: It's true.

J: And I think a good thing for parents and teachers and administrators to do, would be to of course enforce, don't bully people, accept people, be kind to people, and do not stand by and watch people get made fun of. But also, kind of uh, alert the kids that are being made fun of, why they are being made fun of, and why it is wrong, and um, counteract whatever negativity has come from the bullying with positivity, and build them back up. That's often what I didn't get when I was made fun of. I mean, yeah, they would say, "oh I'm sorry those people made fun of you," but it, that's the end of it. They wouldn't go over what the bullies had said to me. And I would still be left with those feelings of inadequacy and insecurity...

T: Yeah, it didn't change that they said those things.

J: Right, right. And no one ever tried, teacher-wise, administrator-wise, to counteract the things that they had said and done.

T: Yeah.

J: And that's something that I think should be done in schools and I think a lot of times they try to sweep bullying under the rug. After it happens, they deal with it and they don't want to talk about it anymore, because it's been dealt with and it's over. But for the people who have actually been bullied, it's not over. It lasts, in some cases for years. And you know, I can still remember stuff that happened fifteen years ago. And I can still remember clear as day today. And even if the teachers say, you know "ok it's done, and the people have been dealt with who did this to you," that doesn't mean that the emotional scars go away, that doesn't change the fact that it happened. And just because there were repercussions doesn't mean that the person who was bullied is all fine and dandy now.

T: Yeah, the person being punished, and in elementary school punishment is such a menial thing ...

J: Yeah, it really is. It really is.

T: Is um... yeah I think it's hard to know exactly how to deal with these kinds of things, because there are so many brands of bullying-

J: Right.

T: -you know, anyone can be bullied. And then as soon as you stand out for any reason, then you're...

J: Then you're really a target.

T: Yeah, and I think that's something that they don't really acknowledge or specify- I don't know, maybe they do these days, but when I went to school it was not really, you know, bullying was an umbrella term. They didn't specifically say, you know, "and don't do impressions of the person with a limp, for these reasons." Because you need to be told what the reasons you don't do that are at that age, and then nobody would tell us.

J: Exactly. Exactly. And you know, what was ironic to me, was that, I um, yes I experienced bullying in elementary school and some in middle school, um, but the most hurtful, I think, was actually in high school.

T: Sounds about right.

J: Yeah. And you would think, at least I used to think, that people always told me, "oh, well as you grow up, people will become more mature and they won't say things, they won't do things, and it will get better." And the exact opposite occurred. And in fact, in high school, you know, there was one kid in my anatomy class that would, one day he got up, in front of the class. He asked me what was wrong with my leg, why I walked the way I did. And I had pointed him, since it was anatomy class, I pointed him to the direction of our textbook. CP was actually defined in one of the chapters.

T: Oh yeah.

J: And I thought, you know, I'm not gonna waste my time on telling this kid what's wrong because I know he's asking in a spiteful, mean way.

T: He wasn't just curious.

J: He wasn't. And, so, he read the section. I had not read it before he read it. Which was my first mistake. And, in that section of the book, they actually talked about how kids with CP, as I read later, can suffer from "mental retardation"- that's how they said it - and can get seizures.

T: Uh huh.

J: And this kid got up in front of the class and said, announced to the class, "This is Jacob having a seizure and suffering from, being a retard." I believe was the exact word he used.

T: Oh my gosh. And he did an impression?

J: Yes, he did an impression. And what made it all the worse was that the teacher was present; he was literally standing next to the kid, and not only did not stop the kid, but laughed along at the impersonation that he was doing.

T: That's so upsetting.

J: It was, it really was. And um, it almost brought me to tears. And none of the kids in the class stood up for me, none of them told him to stop. They all laughed along. There was not a single person in there that was not at least smiling. And I was very, very hurt because I thought I had friends in that class who would say, "hey, don't make fun of my friend," and not a single kid stood up. And this is junior year of high school. End of junior year of high school.

T: Yeah, and I'm sure there were even people who wanted to but didn't.

J: Yes.

T: Which doesn't make it right not doing it, but that's such a hard time to-

J: It is.

T: - A, to know the right thing to do, and B-

J: To actually do it.

T: To do anything

J: Against the status quo, or majority

T: And like I said it doesn't excuse it, but it's such a crazy, crazy time. It's so hard though, it's ridiculous.

J: And actually the hard part though, the part that upset me the most, was not the kids, and not the kid who got up and did this actually, it was that a teacher was present, and did not do anything to stop it.

T: Yeah.

J: And laughed along with the joke.

T: Yeah, that's... I can't even imagine. Did, was there any follow up? Did you, um...

J: I told a few a people. I had an IEP, which is an individualized educational program, essentially special education; and I had a case worker at school, and I told her about it, and I told a few other people in the, it was called the pupil services

office about it. And this teacher unfortunately was tenured, and had just won the school two back-to-back state championships in 2005 and 2006. So, nothing was going to happen to him.

T: Politically, he was fine, he was safe.

J: Yeah. And no one was going to dare upset him, and so nothing was done. And, you know, that part was the hardest part for me, because I always really, really respected teachers. And I looked up to them as mentors, authority figures, even in some cases friends, protectors, and this teacher had failed me on so many levels. And it was very, very hurtful for me and I never regained my respect for him.

T: Yeah, no, that's...

J: And he still teaches there. And it's unfortunate that things like that happen, so that was definitely something that the teachers did wrong.

T: Very wrong.

J: But I think, you know, what I noticed in high school is there is a lot less talk about bullying; there's, it's just not brought up as much. At least it wasn't when I was in high school.

T: No, I remember it being brought up in middle school...

J: And elementary.

T: And like in fifth grade or something, but there just wasn't, for some reason when it's at its worst, they think that we are somehow over it.

J: Yeah, yeah. And in high school, they really do, I think, need to sit you down in an assembly or in a pep rally or whatever, and really do just need to explain to you, to reiterate, you know, this is how you treat people, and this isn't how you treat people, and this is why, and this what effects it can have. Especially today with the cyberbullying, and the avenues of facebook and twitter and youtube, and I mean there are so many more areas now where kids are vulnerable and can be talked about behind their back and um, it's just, it's so awful. And obviously you can't control everything and like I said; kids are always going to get bullied, I know that, I'm a realist, but; there is more that people could do to curtail it, at least.

T: Entirely. You know, I think we've deluded ourselves as a society to think that we don't need this, but I really think that being a good human being is a necessary curriculum to have because there's so many different things these days that pull you in directions that really aren't good. Reality TV being kind of the paramount

example. A kid who watches Jersey Shore at home, which, he really shouldn't but I'm sure there are plenty of households where it's on the TV-

J: Oh yes.

T: - and so if that's where you're learning your right and wrong in domestic interaction, obviously you need some class where somebody sits you down and tells you why that isn't right and, you know.

J: Well you know, the unfortunate thing, Tyler, is that there are many people out there who don't teach their kids what's right and what's wrong, and how to treat people. And that's what's so upsetting is that these kids would go to school and they would do this to other children, and their parents would be called, and the parents wouldn't care because they were just like the kids.

T: Yes, or vice-versa.

J: And don't see it as a problem. And nothing would be done, there would be no consequences at home, and possibly they may even reinforce the fact that, you know, "you can make fun of kids, it will make them tougher, it will show that you're tough, it's not a bad thing, people will get over it." But you can literally take things like this with you for years. There are kids who commit suicide. Especially recently, there's been a few national known cases; Amanda Todd...

T: These were cyberbullying....

J: Yes, yes, yes. Amanda Todd was cyberbullied, Tyler Clemente, a couple years ago was the teen that was filmed, on Twitter I believe it was, interacting with another boy, and -

T: And it got posted...

J: Yeah, and he ended up jumping off of the Brooklyn Bridge.

T: Oh my god.

J: So, there's just so - or the George Washington Bridge, excuse me. Um, so there's just so many different things that, you know. And that latter case I mentioned, he was in college. So, obviously, even beyond high school, if you go into a college setting, or a work setting, these views need to be reinforced because they just do. There are some people who just don't get it the first time around, and need to be taught over and over and over again.

T: Yeah, absolutely. And I mean, I don't know, if we can kind of, start hinging towards, I mean obviously we're not going to conclude anything here today,

J: Right.

T: But if we could start, what it sounds like to me is, you know, the teaching bullying prevention, and along those lines, and especially doing it on a case-by-case basis, where, you know, if there's an openly gay kid in your class, then you really need to hit home LGBT tolerance, or if there's a kid with a disability, you need to hit home tolerance for the person with the disability, and make it clear what that is.

J: Right. And also beyond bullying prevention is coping with being bullied.

T: That's what I was going to say is paramount, is probably the individual's job to be able to handle and to deal with these things in a healthy way, because that's what really matters at the end of the day, is it's just you who can help yourself. So if you can't cope, then that's where, that's when the bullies actually get the better of you.

J: Yes, yes.

T: Because you've obviously, you know, gone through a lot of hard stuff, and you're totally together, you know, you're not completely downtrodden individual.

J: Not without hardship.

T: Yeah, exactly! But you didn't let it get the better of you. And I think that's kind of the biggest thing is that.

J: Thank you Tyler. That actually is very encouraging to hear.

T: Yeah, good.

J: Someone reaffirm that for me.

T: Yeah. You know, it's so important. And I am, like I said if I broke my foot and didn't learn anything from it, then I'm sure it would have happened very shortly afterwards again but I'm uh, you know, trying to take the full lesson, and um...

J: And that's a very good way to look at it, and you obviously have great coping skills to be able to look at it that way, because I know lots of people who wouldn't be able to look at it that way and would have a pity party.

T: Yeah, pity parties are fun, and easy!

J: Yep, definitely the road more travelled.

T: Yeah, totally. And I think when you're younger it's a lot easier to get by doing that, and then when you start not having the time to pity yourself, then you really

got to learn how to cope because other, you know, if you're so sad, and there's so much to be sad for these days that's not in your own life –

J: There is.

T: - and if you can't cope with it, you can't maintain a job, do well in school, so..

J: Mmhmm..

T: So yeah, I guess if any administrators or teachers are listening to this, definitely, you know, like I said, bullying prevention is already a thing; I don't know how you would integrate coping into the curriculum to.

J: Into the equation.

T: Because I was never taught anything remotely related to coping.

J: Neither was I.

T: They talk, like, the "I" statements, which is useless and doesn't actually work.

J: Right, you got taught, "Ha ha, so?" as the bullyproofing system.

T: Exactly, where, you know... pretty much that just says... I don't even know, what that's telling you to do, because it doesn't allow any room for you to actually feel it emotionally, it's telling you to not feel it and then just ignore it, and that doesn't happen.

J: Exactly, that can't happen. It's human to feel the reactions to what people say.

T: Yeah, you feel it, and then you have to deal with those feelings in a healthy way.

J: And if you hear it enough, you're going to start believing it, and –

T: That's hard too.

J: And that's what, you know, I don't know if there would be any students or kids listening to this, but if you are a kid or if you know a teacher, or if you're a teacher and you notice a child being consistently bullied, or you know talked down in one of your classes, you know, be sure to go up to him and her just reassure them that they are valued, and they are a good person, and that everything the bullies are saying to them is incorrect and should not, should be taken with a grain of salt and not taken seriously.

T: Yeah, yeah because it seems like, especially you know for the younger child, you know, who is in the midst of developing, every time they hear one negative thing, they really need to hear two positive things at least.

J: Exactly, exactly.

T: I think that ratio isn't even close to achieved.

J: It isn't. It isn't at all. But it can be. It most certainly can be.

T: And we're doing stuff here to work on it.

J: And I think within the classroom is especially a good place. I mean the teacher sets the environment for the classroom. And if the teacher brings home the issue of tolerance and acceptance, and furthermore with coping with the world when that doesn't happen, it just, I think the teacher could have a very large impact on how the students deal with one another and deal with life in general, and kids could be better off with a teacher who really cares about them and shows it.

T: Yeah. Most definitely. And you know it's um, I don't know. I wish... and I don't see this happening anytime soon, but I wish there was a component of the grade that had to do with human...skills.

J: Yes, being human. Yes.

T: Because, you know, you shouldn't be allowed to go on to the next step if you haven't developed as a person, as a functioning member of society. I don't know. You know. Teachers in college will threaten you all day long about plagiarism, but if you're just a jerk, there's nothing that happens. In fact you'll probably succeed in today's society.

J: Yeah, exactly.

T: Yeah, well. That's probably not the most positive note to end it on, but I think we touched on some really, really important things, and you know, I mean, it's a tough world out there, so just keeping your own spirits up is really all you can do. And, you know, people in a position of authority, teachers, administrators, like that, you are the ones who are, can really make a difference to do external change, because for the people dealing with this, it's pretty much just up to them to do it and so, we've got to be doing our part and being proactive on our end to. And tying this back to the EAC, if there is anything like this that you see going on in your schools, absolutely don't hesitate to contact us, um, either our EAC or another one for your region - because technically, we're all across the world, so only our listeners in America can really take advantage of the EAC here.

J: Right, right.

T: I'm sure there's comparable things elsewhere. But, yeah, we're specifically Region VIII, so we'll be putting up our contact information at the very end of this, but um, if you aren't in our region but are looking to get in contact with the EAC in your region, definitely give us a call or an email to, because we are just here to facilitate it. But, yeah, good stuff. Anything else to add?

J: You know, thank you for having me Tyler, and I thank you for a great interview, it was a lot of fun, and I hope it can be some assistance to some teachers and administrators and maybe some students through the actions that those teachers and administrators will do as a result of listening to this podcast, so thank you for having me. Awesome.

T: Thank you.

T: If you would like to contact the Region VIII Equity Assistance Center, you may do so at our website, metrostate-eac.org, phone 303-556-6065, or via email, at eac@msudenver.edu. Listeners are also invited to join the conversation by following us on twitter @EACRegion8, or by liking the Equity Assistance Center Region VIII facebook page. Special thanks to the band Northbound for the use of their song Forward in this podcast. Thank you.