In the beginning was the welcome...

Without welcome you do not properly enter, you are not present and so do not participate or perform. ‘WELCOME’ is the first key to successful inclusion.

Everyone who needs a relationship needs a welcome. Particular efforts need to be made when welcoming parents, carers, pupils and other family members into any situation which is unfamiliar to them or in which they are likely to feel anxious, apprehensive, aggressive or defensive. This is often the case for people invited to our meetings, reviews and case conferences.

“Welcome: to receive with gladness, to admit willingly”
The Chambers Dictionary 9th Edition

The UK Audit Commission asked Parent Partnership Officers around the country which families had problems gaining admission to their local schools.

Figure 1: Source Audit Commission (2002) survey of parent partnership officers
Their findings said that pupils who had been excluded, those with behaviour-related labels and anyone with autism all had problems with securing a school place in the usual ways – a problem with being welcomed. It appears that some children and their families get much less of a welcome than others.

Of course the welcome extended to some of us in a whole range of community settings will be different depending on who we are judged to be. Differences in apparent sexuality, race, culture, social class, perceived impairments, behaviour, physical appearance and reputation can all dramatically affect how an individual is welcomed.

“If we want to make our welcome more inclusive then we would do well to start with the physical symbols and environment in which the welcome takes place.”

- Light, warmth, and soft, rather than harsh, furnishings – pot plants and flowers
- Waiting area with a settee to sit on and a cup of tea offered on arrival
- Toys and books suitable for a range of different children and young people
- Pictures and posters reflecting the cultures and differences present in the local community
- Soothing music

Offers of drinks and even food are clear welcome messages, both profound and often cultural in their importance. How do you welcome someone to your own home?

In larger groups the welcome given in situations such as training events, conferences, parents evenings, and other gatherings will benefit from food, drink, sweets, music and colour as they all provide tangible symbols of welcome.
Smiles, tone of voice, warm words, handshakes, and even hugs are a great form of welcome without words. The physicality of the welcome depends on your relationship with the person and their cultural and personal preferences and expectations. Some enjoy a firm handshake, others a hug, whilst others need plenty of space. Keep it respectful.

In larger gatherings, the welcome needs more stage management and can be bigger and more dramatic. Open body posture and upturned hands can accompany effusive, warm welcomes. This is not a time to hold back or to only pick out certain people for a welcome.

Through dialogue and consensus building, ground rules or shared promises can develop. This in turn creates a structure and routine essential for a sense of safety and belonging; this is crucial for setting the right tone for any gathering or meeting.

Self-revelation, openness and sincerity from those welcoming a group or individual of any age or background can help enormously with building a sense of safety and trust.

Providing choices and opt out possibilities for what may be perceived as risky activities, can be reassuring for the anxious, eg “It is ok to say ‘pass’.”

- Be clear
- Use humour to relax and strengthen a group
- Acknowledge real challenges
- Be honest and respectful.

Safety, particularly for our children and vulnerable adults, has never been more important. How can we make sure that school, settings and other places in which we work in communities are as safe as possible? Criminal Record checks will only take us so far, become out of date as soon they are created - but give a misleading sense of safety.
“We have a policy that, with the little kids, at least 2 adults/care providers are present so that there is an accountability/protective structure. With the youth – yes – pairs or threes to assure the same.

Reality is that people get hurt in spite of protective measures, in all kinds of situations. We opt not to do "background checks" because they are not a community structure of protection, they are an institutional "solution." And if they truly worked we would not be seeing so much abuse in foster and institutionalized care where background checks are required. So we opt for a community/relational approach.

It is also our experience that even people with a history of "challenging behaviors" behave better in a circle of community.

Good news also to knowledge we have not had an abuse incident in our 12 years of building community.”

Lois Smidt, 2009, Beyond Welfare

Ensuring more than one person is always present with another is one of the more practical ways of dealing with the challenging issue of safety. No one should ever be left on their own with a person unknown to them. We continue to think together and debate this issue.

Physical contact, including hugs, is essential for many children and adults to feel connected emotionally. There has been so much caution around this issue in the UK and elsewhere that many practitioners are virtually forbidden to touch the children they work with in any way at all. We seem to have forgotten that abuse is by nature secretive and occurs mostly in the family home and in our separate ‘special’ institutions. Have we gone too far in our caution in our ordinary community settings? Many would say we have. We heard this comment while preparing this book:

“I did not think I should tie her hair up for her”
Teaching Assistant, Primary School, Lancashire

It must be time to re-evaluate our approach to touch physical contact and allow common sense to return. Touch is crucial to establishing a sense of belonging and ultimately to the healthy social and emotional development of human beings.
In our western culture we have a strong tendency to be very self-critical as well as judgemental of each other. In schools everyone is judged, tested, assessed!

We magnify each other’s faults and our own. We start with physical difference then move quickly to how people act, behave, what they say and how they say it! We look at ourselves in the mirror, real or imagined and the critical observations begin: *look at that nose, how fat you are!.... and so on.*

Then our negative inner voices can get hold: *you are not good enough, clever enough, quick enough...* and the old favourite: *‘One day, despite my fancy title, my professional front, they are going to find me out...its just little old me and I don’t know much!’*

In our work, we encourage people to put their magnifying glasses aside and try and keep them away the length of the time we are together.

Alternatively using a judge’s wig as a prop and then dramatically removing it, as inspired by Jack Pearpoint, (Inclusion Press, Toronto, Canada) is a simple way of reminding each other that it will help if we are not critical of the session leaders, each other or ourselves.

We have found that when we playfully talk about the serious subjects of judgement and the magnification of mistakes, we can create a safer climate. When we achieve this, children and adults will always become more communicative and creative. They will try out ideas, play and take risks and learning will be optimised.

We find use of the *Jargon Buster* or ‘*Crap Detector*’ to be an essential part of our training sessions. Jack Pearpoint and Marsha Forest from Inclusion Press, Toronto taught us the power of this prop. This instrument is rattled when anyone in the room uses jargon, strange abbreviations or hard to understand sentences. Our teaching has improved since the rattle has sounded in our ears! If something is worth saying it can be said plainly. Too many parents and others are sitting in review meetings right at this minute with only faintest idea what the professionals are talking about and they go away feeling stupid. Jargon excludes people and we need to invent props or
processes that make it unacceptable. We commend the use of the jargon-buster in any review meeting where parents and pupils may be present. Who should get to hold the *buster*? We think you know the answer...everyone!

Or, how about following the lead of the People First movement in the UK who recommend holding up a card with a question mark on it when something is not understood in a meeting.

The *jargon buster* has a role in any learning situation. Try it out in adult training venues as well as classrooms. The risk of appearing foolish may seem high but the promises of greater understanding and increased participation are there for all.

For many children, young people and adults, the use of welcoming rituals and routines can be empowering and provide a heightened sense of security. This is especially important for pupils living in unpredictable family situations, surviving neglect, abuse or loss. It is just as important for those whose impairments lead to a greater feeling of anxiety than others.

Rituals and routines may simply relate to what happens at the start of a day, start of lessons and other key transition points. From standing behind chairs, queuing in corridors, chanting responses, to prayers; all have their value and place in ordered welcome, if this is *what-we-do-round-here*.

A good welcome should be effectively managed and never left to chance.

If we can successfully welcome disabled or challenging children and young people to our settings - we set the tone for all that will follow. Communities, schools and families that embrace inclusion are so often the most welcoming to all who participate or visit them.
Jonathon was joining a new secondary school. He was 13 and carried the label of autism. His welcome needed to be carefully considered as new people and places were likely to make him very anxious. What was put in place really helped him to make a great start at his new school. The elements of a good welcome Jonathon were:

- Being able to visit the new school at a time when there was no one else there
- Looking at photos of key staff and pupils he would meet
- Watching a video of the school in action, showing breaks, lunchtimes and various subjects being taught in different rooms around the school
- Being given a map of the school
- Setting up a meeting between his tutor group and his parents in which information about Jonathon’s differences, strengths and interests was established. The pupils in his tutor group were then able to ask questions respectfully.
- Using the school’s progressive model of cooperation, grouping pupils by interests and skills rather than ability, wherever possible
- Being met by a small welcoming committee of other pupils who knew the school well and who became a supportive circle of friends, meeting weekly for his first year at the school
- Allowing a support assistant from his previous school to work with Jonathon for the first 3 weeks at his new school

There are many ways we can improve the welcome we offer:

- Spend a day together with your team, group or family reflecting on the quality of the welcome in your setting. Who takes responsibility for welcome? Who is at the front door? What rituals and symbols are present already, which could be added?

- Consider those who are least likely to be welcomed in your setting. What could be done to improve the welcome for them? What would make them feel safe or a sense of belonging?
• What will you do about jargon in your setting?

• Who can go ahead to be there to build the bridge for the person you know will struggle to feel welcome? What could they do to prepare people and to make the situation feel as welcoming as possible?

• How will you ensure a sense of safety and belonging for all?

• Turn up the volume on the quality of your own welcome up by 80%. What impact does this have on your life and work?

‘Each one of us needs
In order to be included,
To live a life amongst people
Who can embrace our differences
And in so doing
Embrace their own.
Don’t make us normal
Make us welcome’

From: ‘The Spa School Blues’ – a poem written by Micheline Mason (Mason 2006) after watching ‘Make Me Normal’ a Channel 4 television documentary (June 2005) featuring four young people with autism who all attend a large state-run special school.

• How do we welcome parents who we know are abusers?

• How do we keep community safe without destroying trust?

• How do we welcome child sex offenders into a community?

• How do we welcome children who are so extreme in their behaviour that they are very likely to hurt more vulnerable children?

• Antwone Fisher. Film – View the scene where Antwone a violent, confused young man badly abused as a child is welcomed back into his extended family that he has never met = A five star welcome.