

New Gerber Baby is Welcome Statement About Inclusion of Persons with Visible Differences

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Earlier this spring, Gerber, the iconic baby food producer, named Isa Slish of Edmond, Oklahoma as their 2022 Gerber Spokesbaby. In addition to receiving cash prizes and Gerber food for a year, Isa also will serve as Chief Growing Officer on the company's executive committee during this time. The role often involves a good deal of public exposure.

It is impossible not to be drawn to Isa's beautiful, expressive face. She completely looks the part of the face of Gerber. What's more remarkable, is that Isa has a visible difference. Her parents learned when they were 18 weeks pregnant that Isa would be born without major bones in her right leg. As Isa's mother stated shortly after the announcement: "We hope Isa's story can bring more awareness for limb differences and create greater inclusion for children like her. Because, just like Isa, they too can be or do anything they want!"

Children are born with visible differences across the United States every day. Some are born with more commonly known conditions like cleft lip and palate, which can be improved with surgical treatment throughout childhood and, in some cases, into adolescence. Other conditions, like Isa's, are less common and leave the child—and eventually adolescent and adult—with a physical difference that is readily visible to others.

Such conditions can come with significant psychosocial challenges. Many children experience low self-esteem and poor

body image. Others struggle with depression and anxiety. Some are teased and bullied for looking different. In adolescence and early adulthood, some struggle in the classroom, are challenged to secure and maintain suitable employment (or have jobs where they do not interact with the public), and find romantic relationships difficult.

Persons who do not have a physical difference that is visible to others, for example those who have scars that can be covered with clothing or those who have psychiatric disabilities (that may not be noticeable to others) enjoy a degree of anonymity in public setting. Strangers don't often stare or look away; they don't stop and ask "What happened to you?" These experiences are quite common for those with visible difference. Years from now, unfortunately, Isa is more likely to have those things happen to her than to have someone ask, "Weren't you once the Gerber Spokesbaby?"

For years, persons with visible differences were not routinely represented in mass media. That has fortunately changed and we see a wider representation of humanity on our television screens and devices than ever before. Unfortunately, those who are disfigured are often portrayed in a negative light, reinforcing the inaccurate believe that an atypical appearance is associated with a negative character.

Isa's mother is optimistic that her selection as Spokesbaby makes a great statement

about the importance of inclusion. True inclusion would mean that people like Isa are not only physically and socially present in mainstream settings, like schools and workplaces, but that others welcome and embrace them for their uniqueness. Inclusion offers an opportunity for society to be made better and stronger, to grow as a result of our collective strengths and differences. Yet, it requires a concerted effort on the part of policymakers, researchers, healthcare providers, community members, families, and others, to make inclusion a reality. For example, in partnership with policymakers, providers, and people with lived experience, researchers at the [Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion](#) conduct groundbreaking

research and knowledge translation activities to promote inclusion of individuals with psychiatric disabilities. Reports and toolkits describing [fundamental principles of community inclusion](#), [practical strategies to promote participation in community life](#), and [creation of welcoming places in the community](#) are among the many evidence-based resources available on the Collaborative's website.

As clinical psychologists who work in the areas of visible differences and inclusion, we also applaud Isa's selection as Spokesbaby. May she be able to make changes to how we view and interact with others who look different. We will all be better for it.

About the Authors

David Sarwer, Ph.D., is the associate dean for research and professor of social and behavioral sciences at the College of Public Health at Temple University. For the last 25 years, he has studied the psychological aspects of physical appearance and body image. His current work in this area is supported by grants from the Department of Defense and is focused on the experiences of military veterans who have suffered catastrophic injuries that may leave them candidates for face or hand transplants.

Elizabeth Thomas, Ph.D. is an assistant professor of social and behavioral sciences in the College of Public Health at Temple University. Her work is dedicated to promoting community inclusion and participation among people with psychiatric disabilities, particularly young adults. Currently, she is co-investigator on a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR) that aims to identify and enhance community participation-promoting practices within early intervention in psychosis programs.

Conflicts of Interest

Dr. Sarwer has consulting relationships with Ethicon and NovoNordisk, companies that offer products to treat obesity.

Statement of Contributions

Dr. Sarwer wrote the initial draft of this paper. Drs. Sarwer and Thomas both contributed to the revision of the manuscript as well as have read and approved the final version of the document.