Harriet: Has your child ever felt like they don't fit in or that no one understands how they feel? Maybe they think they're the only person in the world who looks, moves, or thinks the way they do. Cathy Ray, disabled writer, journalist, and single mum to two disabled children, wants your child to know they are not alone. They belong in the world exactly as they are.

This is the message of Cathy's new book, *How to Be Disabled and Proud (or at least kinda sorta okay with it...)*. Described as a powerful call to action for both disabled and non-disabled children, the book encourages readers to advocate for a more accessible world and inspires them to embrace their disabled identity. Written for children aged 9 and up, it's an essential guide to growing up disabled, covering topics such as navigating school life, finding a disabled community, building confidence, facing challenges like bullying and discrimination, and learning to value and celebrate yourself just as you are.

I'm Harriet, host of *Contacts Helpful* podcast for families with disabled children, and in this episode, I'm delighted to welcome Cathy to talk about her new book, *How to Be Disabled and Proud (or at least kinda sorta okay with it...)*.

Hi, Cathy, it's great to have you with us. We're really excited to learn more about your book. Could you start by telling us a bit about yourself and your background?

Cathy: Of course, thank you for having me. For the benefit of the listeners, I'm an almost 39-year-old white woman with Dwarfism. I live in southeast England and have two children, aged almost 11 and 7, who also have SM.

I grew up as the only person in my family with a disability, or at least one like mine, which I might talk more about later. The gene was passed down to my children, so their experience has been very different from mine. They've grown up with a parent who shares their disability. However, there are still plenty of universal experiences they encounter as they navigate life.

I don't know about you, but I'm sure many listeners can relate – I don't always say the right thing, I can be clumsy with my words, and I sometimes think, "Why did I say that?" or "I should've said this instead." Parenting is a constant learning process, isn't it? That was the inspiration behind my book.

I wanted the chance to step back and really think about what I'd like to tell my children about this stage of their lives, as they move between the ages of 8 and 12. I wanted to prepare them for what's ahead, support them, and help them navigate it. Writing gave me the space to put everything together in a coherent, thoughtful way – better than I'd manage in a live conversation.

It's been wonderful to see the book reach other disabled children and their carers as well. But ultimately, I wrote it for my kids.

Harriet: I love that. You touched on this in your book, but for those listening, you started out as a journalist. Had you always wanted to write a book, or how did you transition from journalism to becoming an author?

Cathy: There's now a relatively new way of becoming an author through building a presence on social media. It's quite hard to sell books nowadays, especially non-fiction, but publishers have caught on to influencers who already have an engaged and established audience. For them, the buy-in for the book is much greater than for someone unknown.

I was writing articles for newspapers like *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, and literary agents started connecting that with the social media presence I'd built at the time – around three or four years ago. One agent contacted me, saying they'd love to represent me and try to secure a book deal. Because I could write – having been published by major outlets – and already had an audience, they saw an opportunity.

So, I chose an agent and wrote a book proposal, but it was rejected by 20. After that, I took a year to reflect on what I really wanted to do. Then Puffin, part of Penguin, contacted my agent saying they were looking for a disabled author with an idea for a book. The concept for my book immediately came to me, and from there everything snowballed.

Harriet: Amazing. What an opportunity to collect your thoughts, put them down on paper, and already have a receptive audience. That makes perfect sense.

Cathy: To answer your actual question, I wasn't ever thinking, "I really want to write a book." But being part of that influencer and online presence meant people would regularly message me asking, "When are you going to write a book?" So, it plants the idea in your head.

It's no longer just "get married, buy a house, have two kids." Now it's "become an influencer, write a book!" It felt like the natural next step. I'd never do something I didn't want to, but writing a book wasn't a lifelong ambition.

Harriet: That's really interesting. I suppose there are a lot of influencers out there who may not have the skills to do that. We're lucky that you're such a skilled writer and can express complex thoughts and ideas, especially for children, in such a clear, accessible way. I imagine your experience as a journalist really helped with the expectation that you could deliver a book.

Cathy: Yes, I suppose so.

Harriet: I've read your book, but for listeners who haven't yet, what areas of growing up do you explore? What key points did you want to address?

Cathy: Writing the book gave me the chance to reflect a lot on my own childhood, particularly that middle-grade period. What struck me most was how much that time is

about change – or being on the brink of change. Whether it's transitioning to secondary school, going through puberty, or thinking about gender and sexuality in new ways, there are so many transitions happening all at once. It can be overwhelming and confusing, not just for non-disabled children but also for disabled children.

I knew I wanted to tackle these big topics because, as far as I know, they've never been addressed through a disability lens in mainstream media. When I was growing up, much of the advice on these topics felt alienating because my experiences were so different. That's what drove me to explore these themes.

I talk about puberty, transitioning to secondary school, going to the doctor, and hospital visits – because learning how to advocate for yourself in those settings is so important. I also discuss work and passions because disabled children are often led to believe they can't follow their dreams or should limit them. It's so important to say, "No, you deserve to go after what you want, whatever that looks like."

One of the most important sections for me is about building connections with other disabled people. Growing up in a non-disabled family, I often felt so alone. Having other disabled kids to talk to, even if they were far away, was essential. It gave me life. Meeting up with them gave me a sense of comfort and freedom to be myself in a way I didn't feel at school. That's why a big part of the book focuses on how to build those connections, what they might look like, and different ways to create them.

Another key section is about activism. You're never too young to start standing up for your rights and the rights of others. I also wanted to ensure the book doesn't have a "pity me" tone. I want kids to recognise that, yes, this is a hard time in life, but the book is here to support you. And while you're struggling, others are too – Some harder, some not, it's a spectrum of hardness!

Let's look out for one another, stand up for each other, and find ways to make a difference together.

Harriet: Yeah, definitely. I found the parts about finding other people to connect with and identify with really, really interesting because I actually have cystic fibrosis.

And I didn't know anybody else who had CF when I was little. Then, as I got older and started having hospital admissions, I met other people, and it was amazing. I didn't realise what I was missing, in that connection – other people who totally understood where I was coming from, what was difficult, and why it was difficult. I had no realisation that I needed that.

And things have moved on in CF now, and unfortunately, people with CF are not allowed to meet face-to-face anymore. So they have to find other ways to connect. But that connection is so important. I think, particularly as you say, if you are the only person in your family with the condition, the rest of your family might not realise the importance of finding other

people with the same condition as you. I think your book really encourages that and highlights the positives of those connections.

Cathy: One recurring theme was always boys, right? Especially when you're entering that age. And it's funny because I don't even fancy boys anymore, but I did at that time. Well, men, should I say. And so, when I was that age everybody was talking about boys – boys, boys, boys, boys.

And that was the conversation that actually made me feel more alone than any other conversation because I always felt like I was made to feel, you know, unfanciable. No boys would look at me – all of that kind of stuff. And having that disabled friend, even though she lived in Newcastle and I lived in Norfolk, was amazing.

Yeah, we only saw each other once a year, but just having a phone call with her and talking about all that was incredible because she really got it. My parents didn't get it because they'd never been through it, you know? They had always been treated as desirable.

It's such a big part of that growing-up journey that if you are in that undesirable category, whether permanently or temporarily, it honestly changes the course of those years for you significantly.

Harriet: Yeah, absolutely. But that validation from somebody else who completely understood what you were feeling and thinking...

Cathy: It just kind of reaffirms that it's not you. It's the system at play here.

Harriet: Were there any topics you wanted to include but had to leave out? Might there be a sequel?

Cathy: I really wanted to delve more into romantic relationships, sex, and related topics, but I didn't because of the age range. It wasn't appropriate for the intended audience. That said, I feel this is an area lacking in literature – what does sex look like for disabled people? The conversation around this just doesn't get enough attention. It's definitely something I'd love to explore at some point. Apart from that, I think I managed to include everything else I wanted.

Harriet: The book features interviews with a range of disabled changemakers and friends. Can you tell us why you decided to include these interviews and other voices apart from your own? Why was that important to you?

Cathy: Absolutely. I was very conscious not to position myself as the disabled person representing the disabled experience, because our experiences are so vast and unique. Someone with dyslexia and dyspraxia will have a completely different life experience to me.

Likewise, someone who's blind and has epilepsy will have a completely different perspective. There are so many differences, but you get the idea.

While our experiences intersect, and we universally face issues like ableism and inaccessibility, how those challenges manifest can vary greatly depending on our disabilities and impairments. It was really important to me to include as wide a range of voices as possible to share their experiences and tips. The book contains many direct quotes, but there are also sections where I consulted others without quoting them directly. These contributions helped include elements that I hope will make as many children as possible feel seen, understood, and supported – regardless of their specific disabilities.

Harriet: Absolutely. Another brilliant part of the book is the practical tips. So often, we discuss complex concepts and difficult situations – like bullying and relationships – but then leave it at that, simply acknowledging how challenging it is before moving on. What I loved about your book was the inclusion of actual practical tips that children can use to navigate these tough situations. I thought that added a whole new dimension to the book and made it incredibly empowering.

Cathy: Thank you so much.

Cathy: Oh, that's exactly what I hoped for. When I was young, I had very little confidence. I was so shy, and standing up to a bully would have been something I couldn't imagine doing. I would have literally rather eaten something awful, like mouldy cheese. Even if you can't follow the tips in the book, just seeing them written down and discussing them with a parent or friend can help you realise that boundaries are an option. That's so important. I wrote it partly with myself as a child in mind, but also hoping that other kids in similar situations might take away something, even if they can't immediately implement all the advice in the book.

Harriet: Exactly. Even if you can't fully express it, just having some ideas of how to address these situations is a step forward. It builds on acknowledging how hard it is. As we've discussed, the book covers navigating the transition into teenage years and adulthood, but it also focuses on advocating for yourself and standing up for your rights. Why was it important to include both perspectives?

Cathy: I think they're intrinsically linked. If you can't stand up for yourself, even in small ways, or get support from others in doing so, then your experiences with things like transitioning to secondary school, puberty, friendships, or dealing with bullies will inevitably be much harder. It was so important to me to include advice on what standing up for yourself could actually look like – how you could get others involved, who you could lean on, and so on. Without that, it would feel like saying, "Your life is hard, oh well, move on." But actually, there are things you can do, and it's vital to focus on those possibilities.

Harriet: Absolutely. If I've understood correctly, your message is that it's not the individual – it's the system, society, and the way things are structured that make life harder than it needs to be. To change that, though, we need to explore activism, stand up for ourselves,

and push for change. The two go hand in hand – you can't just shrug and say, "Well, society's flawed, that's it."

Cathy: Exactly, because what hope does that give?

We want to motivate this generation to strive for better for the next generation as well. Quite often, disabled children are born into non-disabled families. However, if those disabled children grow up and want children themselves, it's likely that their children may also be disabled. They will want better for their children, and it's important to recognise this cycle.

It's crucial to engage in any form of activism, no matter how small. This could mean writing to your MP, attending a town hall meeting to hear them speak, or raising issues about challenges children are facing in schools. There are countless ways to make a difference. While young people often need help from adults to get involved, it's certainly not impossible for an eight-year-old to take part. I've seen many occasions where children, even younger than that, have actively supported and stood up for their communities. This is incredibly important.

Harriet: Absolutely. You've mentioned your parents supporting you through your childhood, and much of our work involves supporting parents to improve the overall well-being of the family. How do you think the challenges your parents faced compare to those you're dealing with as a parent now?

Cathy: That's an interesting question. When I was born, there was still quite a bit of fear, particularly medical fear, around Achondroplasia, which is my condition, even though people with it have existed for hundreds of years.

My medical teams had never managed the care of someone with my form of dwarfism. Some of them may never have even met anyone with it. There are still so many people who have never met someone like me. I think there was a lot of fear surrounding it at the time.

I was really lucky because my parents, for their time, were incredibly accepting and fully prepared to deal with whatever came after my birth. They just wanted to make sure I was okay – which should be the standard, but sadly isn't always, especially in those days.

I do feel like society is gradually becoming more open to disability, rather than running away from it. This shift can also be seen in how perceptions of neurodivergence have changed over the past 20 years. Initially, people thought neurodivergent children had mental disorders, or that there was something wrong with them – that they were just misbehaving. Now, parents are more likely to recognise autism or other conditions and say, "Let's see what support we can put in place." It's incredible to see how many parents now advocate for their children.

That progress is a testament to how far we've come in embracing disability in children and moving past the overwhelming fear I mentioned earlier. While fear may still exist, it's no longer all-encompassing in the way it once was. Of course, this isn't the same experience for everyone, but it's something I've observed.

I'm very connected to the dwarfism community, and most people with dwarfism are born into families with no prior experience of it. When I meet these families – usually average-height parents – their main concern is the same as my parents' almost 40 years ago: they just want their child to be happy and okay.

That's such a powerful instinct and, as a parent, holding onto that will help you ensure your child grows up happy and well-supported.

Harriet: Absolutely. I think there is so much more information available now. In general, there's a vast amount of information, but condition-specific resources are much more accessible. At Contact, we're passionate about ensuring people have the information they need to advocate for their children and secure the support they require. Years ago, that information wasn't as easy to find. You had to do much more research and digging on your own.

Cathy: Definitely. I remember when I was young, BMI, for example, didn't work for people with dwarfism because our height is much shorter. I recall people constantly worrying about my BMI because it was off the charts. They'd suggest putting me on a diet, but it was simply because I was short – it didn't apply to me. There wasn't that level of education about it in medical settings. Now, having had my own children, it's a completely different experience. Medical professionals understand it better, and we're able to access so much information online. Thanks to Google, it's much easier to figure out what's concerning and what isn't for us. We just didn't have that kind of access when I was growing up.

Harriet: Exactly. For your parents, that lack of knowledge must have been terrifying. They didn't have the resources, and the medical professionals they relied on didn't have the information either. That must have been very concerning.

Cathy: Yes, exactly. Thank you. In your book, you write about friendships and emphasise that they're a two-way street, where you have just as much to give as you take. I found a lot of what you wrote really empowering, which is something we're very passionate about at Contact. Was empowerment something important to you when writing the book?

Cathy: Absolutely. When I was a child, I don't think I can honestly say I gave as much to my friendships as I expected from others. At the time, I believed I was at a disadvantage because I was physically disabled, and therefore, others should give more. Over the years, my perspective has changed. It's never that clear-cut. Yes, I may have been the only physically disabled person in many of my friendships, but everyone has their challenges. For example, there might have been a child with undiagnosed autism, ADHD, dyslexia, or dyspraxia. Maybe another child struggled with severe anxiety, depression, or difficulties at home. Everyone has their own battles to navigate.

And quite often, that might not have been visible to a parent or known, but we all have our struggles. It was only as I grew up that I realised this isn't how friendship should work. Friendship should be a two-way relationship, and it doesn't matter if I experience more hardship than them or they experience more hardship than me. We need to meet in the middle, with give and take.

I felt it was important to include that message in the book because I didn't want it to come across as a "pity me, I'm the disabled child" narrative. Nobody wants a friend like that. At the end of the day, people want a friend who feels empowered, who can give and take equally in the relationship.

Harriet: I think attitudes have changed and are still changing. But your childhood perspective was very typical of how many people thought – that you should be friends with someone because it's kind or charitable. I really loved that your book makes it clear: you've got to give as much as you take, and you've got something to give. That's the key.

Cathy: Exactly. If you feel like you're someone who's always taking, is it because you feel you've got nothing to give? Have you been told this narrative that disabled children have nothing to offer? That's simply not true.

Harriet: Absolutely not true. I just found that a really important message that I don't see in many other places. Thank you. It felt like a really good message to be sharing. In the chapter on starting secondary school, you say that accepting yourself is the first step towards feeling accepted by others. I think that's such a great way to approach things. Throughout your book, you're so open to people doing whatever makes them feel most comfortable.

I wanted to talk a bit more about terminology and the stigma around the word "disabled" because I think there might be children, young people, or their families who don't see themselves as disabled. That might stop them from reading your book or make them feel it's not for them. I worry about that because there's so much valuable content, and I don't want people to miss out.

We've found something similar within Contact. Families often come to us and say, "Oh, I didn't realise my child has autism, so I didn't think I could access your services," because we're Contact for children with disabilities. We're currently exploring terminology within the organisation as well. I think it's a tricky issue because you're never going to please everyone, but there is definitely societal stigma around the word.

Cathy: Yes, absolutely. I think in the last 20 years there has been a shift, especially in relation to the neurodivergent community and how things have changed for them. Over time, "disabled" has actually become an incredibly empowering word because it recognises that the things that make us different – our disabilities – are not our fault. They're not something that make us any less than others and are often caused by the environment around us.

Not always, but quite often. I think there is too much hesitation when it comes to using the word “disabled.” It’s just a descriptive term – like saying I’m white, I’m a woman, or I’m a mum. I’m disabled. It’s simply a fact about me. It only becomes a shameful word when we attach a sense of shame to it.

Harriet: That's really interesting. So you're reclaiming that word.

Cathy: Yes, absolutely. Going back to the neurodivergent community, as we've seen this shift in education around neurodivergence and more families realising they have neurodivergent children, or even discovering that they, as adults, are neurodivergent, there's often this hesitation: "Can I call myself disabled? Am I ready to identify as disabled?"

There’s a lot of conversation around that. It was so important to me to include several neurodivergent voices in the book, speaking on various matters, because everyone is welcome in the disabled community. Often, we think of disability as something really specific – like wheelchair users, people with terminal illnesses, or those with autism. But in reality, we all experience disability at some point in our lives – whether in the past, present, or future.

For example, if you experience frequent migraines, you’re disabled by your migraine when it happens. If you have endometriosis, you’re disabled during a flare-up. There are so many ways we can be disabled by things happening inside our bodies or minds.

I think the more we recognise that disability exists both within the home and outside of it – and, in fact, in every home – the more we can take away the enormity of it. It often feels like such a big, heavy concept. But the truth is, disability affects all of us regularly, and that's something we need to acknowledge and normalise. It’s simply a fact of life.

Harriet: Yes, that’s exactly how we feel at Contact. We need to keep taking steps to spread that awareness, promote acceptance, and de-stigmatise disability.

Okay, those are all of my questions. Was there anything you feel I haven’t touched on or that you'd like to discuss further?

Cathy: I wanted to share a message, which I’ve also included in my book, as I know many people listening to this will be parents. I want to say that it can be really hard being a disabled child, and it can also be quite hard at times being the parent of a disabled child. Whether you yourself are disabled or not, there is a lot of responsibility on your shoulders. I want to acknowledge and hold space for that.

Parents are doing a great job, and yes, you are going to make mistakes. I’ve made mistakes, even though I share the same disability as my children. I mess up all the time and will continue to do so, and so will you. But the fact that you’re listening to this, the fact that you might engage with my book, is amazing. These steps are crucial in unlearning

misconceptions about disability and learning how to advocate for and support your child in the best way possible. Thank you for listening and for being here.

Harriet: It has been an absolute pleasure. Thank you so much. I'll encourage everyone to read your book – it's so empowering, inspiring, and an absolute joy. It's funny, full of fascinating insights, and packed with practical tips that are incredibly helpful. I'm a huge fan, so thank you very much for your time today.

Harriet: Thanks to Kathy for joining us and sharing all about her book, *How To Be Disabled and Proud (or at least kinda sorta okay with it...).* It's available in all good bookshops, as well as an eBook and audiobook, narrated by Kathy herself.

Before Kathy joined us, we were thrilled to give away copies of her book on our Facebook page. To enter the prize draw, we asked you to share something your disabled child has achieved that made you proud. Congratulations to Lindsay, Jill, Lisa, and Karen! We hope you enjoy your copies – do let us know what you think.

Here's a selection of some of our favourite moments you shared:

Vanessa said: *"I am so proud that my son now trusts me with his feelings. He told me when his tummy hurt because he was anxious, and he explained he was afraid to ask for help at nursery because he felt overwhelmed. I'm so proud of him."*

Jane said: *"My disabled child is now 34. She has a job as a midday supervisor at a local special school, and she absolutely loves her role there."*

Karen shared: *"I'm proud of my son James, who draws, paints, and sells his artwork to raise money for charity."*

Harley wrote: *"A staff member at my son's school told me he's a gorgeous young man with a lovely soul. That made me so proud."*

Marzena shared: *"My son's achievement was finding his voice by not accepting everything. He is non-verbal with limited communication, but he stopped accepting any colour of bowl and now chooses by pointing to the one he wants. To some, it's just a bowl, but for us, it's the beginning of him finding his voice. I'm so proud of him for being himself."*

Finally, we were excited to receive this voice note:

"Hi, my name is Logan. I am 10. I have Achondroplasia too. I think Cathy's book is brilliant. If I had two, I would give one to my school. I'm proud that I am fit and healthy."

We love all these achievements – thank you to everyone who contributed. You can read more of them on our Facebook page.

For advice on the topics raised in this podcast, visit our website at www.contact.org.uk/advice.

That's it for this episode. Thanks for listening, and see you next time!