

Ellen Crosby: The Support the Palins Really Need

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[Ellen Crosby | Washigton Post](#)

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Ever since John McCain picked Sarah Palin to be his running mate, many have lavished praise on her decision not to have an abortion after she and her husband learned that their youngest child, Trig, would be born with Down syndrome. Do those telling Palin "attagirl" and "way to go" have any idea what challenges and struggles Trig's parents -- and all of us who care for children with special needs -- live with every day? Though everyone cheered the Palin family in Minnesota this week, will those people be there for that little boy and his family when their support is really needed?

How much better it would be if we could see past the hyper-toxic subject of abortion in this election and let Sarah and [Todd Palin](#)'s decision spotlight a topic far from our national consciousness: the needs of Americans with disabilities. They are our country's most underserved, neglected and marginalized minority.

The parents of every special-needs child know that the Palins have a hard road ahead of them. The heartbreak of watching the isolation and loneliness Trig will face because he wants to be like other kids but isn't. The first time they find out he sits alone in the cafeteria and on the school bus. The realization that Trig understands why he doesn't get asked to the movies or birthday parties like other kids but doesn't know what he did wrong.

The toughest challenges that [Sarah Palin](#) will face as the Republicans' vice presidential nominee will probably look like a walk in the park when, as a mother, she sees how invisible her son is to people who look away or through him at the grocery store or the mall. She will be frustrated by doctors who dismiss her concerns as overreacting or have no answers for her questions. She will grow weary of the mountain of legal documents she and her husband must sign and the annual negotiations and pleas they must endure with a phalanx of teachers, therapists and administrators about what Trig's curriculum will be at school.

The Palins will come to understand with acute clarity that while the sky is the limit for their other children, for Trig the world will gradually become a smaller place. And it will be their life's work to make sure that world is safe and nurturing and fulfilling -- a place where strangers don't take advantage of him or abuse him when they can't be there to prevent it. They will be tested and angered and have their hearts broken. But the most challenging journey will be Trig's, as he struggles with the basic tasks most of us take for granted.

Still, there will be joy. The Palins will discover that this child will change their lives in ways they could never have imagined, and they will be richer for it. They will make friends and meet teachers, therapists and volunteers at [Special Olympics](#) and Best Buddies who will open their hearts and love Trig, treating him with a dignity he too rarely receives. Those good, compassionate people and the other special families who become part of their world will get them through tough times.

It is said that God chooses the families to whom he sends His special children. The Palins are indeed right that Trig is a blessing and a gift. But how much better would it be if, instead of praising Sarah Palin for not choosing abortion, we could focus instead on what this child, and all disabled Americans, need from us? If we could be there for the Palins on the journey they face as a family? Doing so would surely add to the diversity of an election year that has already shattered barriers of race and gender.

Ellen Crosby is a novelist who lives in Northern Virginia. She and her husband have an autistic son.