

Living with intellectual disability in The Dreamhouse

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The Dreamhouse launches tonight on ABC1. Artemis Films

“I’m not a mummy’s boy any more!” proclaims Justin. “You never were!”, counters his mother Margaret.

Justin, aged 32, is leaving home for the first time. He has Down syndrome and he and two others who also have intellectual disabilities are housemates in [The Dreamhouse](#). The new six-part reality TV series [goes to air on ABC1](#) tonight.

It features three young adults finding independence. They’re not living by themselves. Rather, they’re placed in a situation where, with the help of support workers, they are learning to lead sustainable lives in an environment largely of their own shaping, away from immediate parental support and direction.



The Dreamhouse residents outside their home. Artemis Films

The dialogue between Margaret and Justin encapsulates one of the program’s themes. What a parent perceives as nurturing might be experienced as babying. Leaving home can be liberating – but by presenting the parents’ (or mothers’) perspectives as well, the series explores the ambivalence and occasional pain associated with severing the relationship of interdependence.

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Making everyone a winner

The Dreamhouse series offered the participants something unique: a home in Perth’s suburbs; volunteer support for the duration of the shooting; and the opportunity to remain in the house afterwards. The series fits into that genre of reality TV which gives its audience insight into a poorly-understood subculture, but it is more Castaway (a 2000 documentary where participants relocated to a Scottish island for 12 months) than Big Brother or Survivor.

The series sets out to record a rite of passage: moving out of home. On board is a volunteer support crew who is working with the housemates and a “disability specialist” to develop the domestic, social and personal attributes necessary for success. Everyone is a winner; everyone can share the prize.

Yet the project aroused some disquiet within the disability support community when it was first mooted.

Criticism focused on the nature and composition of the house. A household comprising only individuals with disabilities does not mesh with most favoured practice for disability housing – a more inclusive mix of people is preferred. The process of choosing housemates, based as much on their telegenic qualities as their compatibility, was also seen as artificial.

But above all, concern centred on the potential for exploitation of the individuals involved, and the possible creation of negative images of disability. Consequently some organisations sought to openly distance themselves, even to advocate against participation in what they viewed as “Big Brother with disability”.

Laughing with the disabled

Media representations of people with disabilities need to be sensitive.

In his 2007 research project “Laughing at the Disabled” Queensland PhD student and filmmaker Michael Noonan drew into focus some of the difficult questions around people with intellectual disabilities and media responsibility. Where the line between entertainment and exploitation lies is

still a matter of dispute, as is the larger role of the media in creating and propagating stereotypes of disability.

In *The Dreamhouse* the behaviour of the housemates is certainly scrutinised, such as when their behaviour is discussed at support worker debriefing sessions. At times some of the behaviour presented seems immature. But let’s remember, Justin and Kirk are hardly the first young men to discuss the digestive impact of baked beans at the breakfast table. Nor is Sarah the first young woman in a group house to complain about “boys behaving badly”. In so many ways the household is almost stereotypically “normal”.

Beyond that, the directors have deliberately chosen to show the interactions between housemates and support workers to illuminate the types of issues people with intellectual disabilities may well face in leaving home. To pretend that support or intervention is unnecessary, training in social skills not required, would be a misrepresentation.

The series is at times downright funny, but in my view, we are laughing with, not at, the housemates. When Kirk expresses a wish to run around naked in his own home this is surely evidence of what it means to him to be away from his parents. (And if he did wind up doing so, the footage didn’t make the final cut.)

Individualising disability and re-evaluating the ‘normal’

The series is also poignant, even deeply moving.

Kirk, Sarah and Justin are personable, engaging and hardworking. At times we are shown challenging behaviour. We also see individuals with the capacity to exercise judgement, defend their opinions, defuse tension and manage relationships. These skills would go a long way in any group household or workplace.

Most remarkable though is the extraordinary sensitivity, self-awareness and empathy of the housemates, which for some viewers may disrupt their understanding of what is “usual” for people with disabilities.

Despite a few unfortunate comments about “what all people with Down syndrome/autism are like”, the series completely debunks the myth that people with intellectual disabilities are all the same. Kirk, Sarah and Justin clearly demonstrate the importance of background and gender over disability in influencing behaviour - and perhaps compatibility.

Making choices and the disability accommodation crisis

Is an intellectual disability sufficient common ground to justify sharing a house? In a perfect world, perhaps not; but many ageing parents of people with intellectual disabilities desperate to find a home and a sustainable lifestyle for their children will never enjoy the luxury of choice.

The availability and cost of housing, capacity to pay for support, and parents’ values and attitudes towards independence are more likely to determine housing arrangements than principles of best practice. While this may be regrettable, at present the dream of inclusive housing, like fully inclusive education, remains unrealised. A dearth of suitable accommodation, inadequate government funding arrangements and frankly, attitudes toward people with intellectual disability, need to progress a long way first.

Turning up the volume on disability

A recent [article in *The Conversation*](#) decried the increasingly monochrome face of the ABC, citing for example the relative lack of cultural diversity in programs such as *Australian Story*.

Diversity is broader than ethnicity and indigeneity. At a time when the ABC has just turned down the volume on disability issues by cutting [Ramp Up](#), and the federal government has slashed the position of dedicated Disability Discrimination Commissioner, *The Dreamhouse* is a bold and laudable attempt to broadcast voices we don’t hear often enough.

This is reality TV with heart, soul and guts. It should be watched by those outside the disability community as well as those within it.



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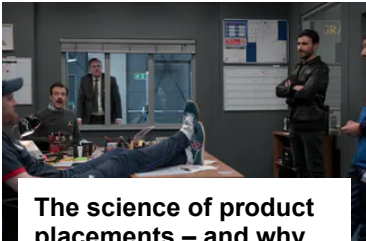
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