



The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 6, Episode 7

Amanda Morin | NCLD and Understood.org

Tim Villegas (00:00):

Have you ever thought about starting your own podcast? When I was trying to get the think inclusive podcast off the ground, I didn't know where to start. I had so many questions. How do I record an episode? Where do I find background music? How do I get my show on apple podcast, spotify, and all the other places? People like to listen? Where do I even find advertisers? The answer to every one of these questions is really simple. Anchor anchor is a one stop shop for recording, hosting, distributing, and monetizing your podcast. And Best of all, it's 100 percent free and 100 percent ridiculously easy to use. So if you ever wanted to start a podcast, go to anchor.fm/start to join me in the diverse community of podcasters already using anchor. That's anchor dot FM slash start. I can't wait to hear your podcast.

Amanda Morin (00:58):

Hi, I'm Amanda and you're listening to the podcast

Tim Villegas (01:02):

recording from my office in Beautiful Marietta, Georgia. You are listening to the thing conclusive podcast, episode 22. Today we have Amanda Morin from the National Center for learning disabilities in the amazing online resource. Understood Dot Org, we talk about the transition back to school for students with disabilities. We also discussed strategies parents can use during IEP meetings when it is recommended for their child's and move to a more restrictive setting. After the podcast, please visit [Patron.com backslash think inclusive podcast](https://patron.com/backslashthinkinclusivepodcast) where you can support our goal to bring you in depth interviews with inclusive education and community advocacy thought leaders. Also, you can help other people find us by giving us a five star review on apple podcasts or wherever you listen to the inclusive podcasts.

Tim Villegas (01:58):

So without further ado, here is the interview. Hello everyone. Thank you for listening to the thing inclusive podcast. Today we have Amanda Morin from the national center on learning disabilities and [understood.org](https://www.understood.org). Uh, she is a parent and former teacher. I'm slash early intervention specialists, turned education writer and advocate a. She currently serves as an expert in the content development manager for the national center for learning disabilities. Uh, primarily on the [understood.org](https://www.understood.org) program, but also on a new educator initiative as well. She is the author of three books, the everything parent's guide to special education, the everything kids learning activities book and on the go fund for kids more than 250 activities to keep little ones busy and happy anytime, anywhere. Thank you for being on the podcast. Amanda.

Amanda Morin (03:03):

Thanks for having me. It's a big promise, isn't it? Anytime. Anywhere. Keep them happy. That's a, that's a big process.

Tim Villegas (03:07):

That is. I, I'm sure. I'm sure the content delivers though. Well, thank you. I hope it does. Well, this is great. Uh, we were just talking before we started recording that uh, you and I have never actually talked before, but we're, I've been familiar with, you know, all of your tweets and content for a long time now. I can't even remember how long

Amanda Morin (03:36):

and that's the same here. The same. I feel like we've traveled in the same circles for forever and this is so exciting to actually, I just realized I didn't know what your voice sounded like, but I felt like I know you already. Isn't that such a strange

Tim Villegas (03:48):

family? Yeah, it is. It is. Likewise. Likewise. So I guess what, if anything, are you working on right now that I know that you've written books, I know that you're working on, um, you know, understood. Uh, is there anything that you're working on right now?

Amanda Morin (04:04):

Sure. So you mentioned a little bit briefly that, um, I worked for the national center for learning disabilities and understood that org is one of our programs and it's designed specifically for parents of kids with learning and attention issues, which encompasses learning disabilities, adhd and things. I'm struggling learner kind of things, but I'm working primarily, I'm splitting my time now between that and a new educator initiative which I'm super excited about because what we're looking at is providing resources and information and support for general educators in the classroom who are working with kids with disabilities because we know that kids are in their classroom like hopefully all the time, hopefully close to 75 percent of the time. Hopefully they're, you know, fully included. And so we want to make sure that teachers are having practical and actionable tools to make that work really well. Um, and so that's a project that is going to have a Beta launch in January and by next June should be sort of fully expanded and it's been a year and a half of research and just exciting stuff. I'm excited about it.

Tim Villegas (05:07):

That's fantastic. Is there, is there any plan on rolling out on how, how you're going to let teachers know about this resource?

Amanda Morin (05:15):

Definitely. Well, certainly one of the things that we've been doing is, you know, you said you're familiar with tweets and those kinds of things. We're going to be, I think leveraging the social media presence of understood and the national center for learning disabilities to let teachers know, but we're also working with multiple organizations and people like you in this field to make sure that, that you're able to share it with the people you know who really need the resources. And the neat thing is we're looking at free. Right? And that's such a huge thing for teachers. I mean, having been a former teacher, I mean I'm a recovering teacher. I don't know how you, what you would call that freeze. Huge, right? Because you're spending a lot of your own money in a emotional investment in getting the right things for the kids in your classroom because they're your kids no matter whose kids they are, they're your kids. So I'm

excited about this. We're certainly gonna let people know as soon as we have Beta launched in January and we'll make sure that those sort of are tweeted out or shared out email, newsletter out, all those kinds of things. So it's an exciting project to be doing, to work on both sides and see how parents and teachers can work together is really exciting to me.

Tim Villegas (06:24):

Great. Um, now I, I heard in what you said that you are recovering teacher, I'm trying to think is an interesting, interesting phrase. Um, how, how long were you a teacher, a classroom teacher? Were you a classroom teacher?

Amanda Morin (06:40):

Um, I was a classroom teacher and then I worked primarily. Um, so I transitioned from being a classroom teacher to being a sort of working with parents and kids together in the early intervention space as a classroom teacher for 10 years. Have to think about that 10 years. And then I did sort of, I would say it's private, but it's not, it's just different setting. It was um, because I worked for the Department of Education in the state that I live in and it was private settings because you would go into kids' homes because when you work with kids who are younger, you're in their environment because that's where they need to be learning. And that was lots of fun. That was a lot of fun. I miss it.

Tim Villegas (07:20):

Yeah. Well now you get to support, you know, you get to support education in a different way. So that's good. Uh, would you say, would you say that, um, the, as far as being an educator that you felt frustrated because that's what I'm kind of picking up that, that, uh, that the recovering part or is that, am I reading that correct?

Amanda Morin (07:43):

Oh, I think, I know, I mean, I think that there's always frustrations in being a teacher. I think for me, I wanted to do more time working with the kids, you know, I want it to be able to do more teaching and less paperwork and that kind of thing. But I think the recovering part is that I miss the classroom not recovering because I feel like I'm always, I mean, I write books for parents about education. I write about education, so I'm teaching in a different realm. My kids would probably tell you I teach too much at home too. But that's the recovering part I think is that I, I, I still feel connected to it, the classroom in a way that I think I will never stop feeling connected.

Tim Villegas (08:20):

Oh, okay. No, I like that. I like that he put it a little bit more positive spin on that. That was, that's good. Um, well, depending on when you were listening to this, it's back to school time. And so we have a lot of kids transitioning back into school. Uh, for instance, in, in my district were already back in school, so yes, I know. Uh, yeah. So, uh, we had, uh, it's, you know, it's a two month summer, but we do get the breaks in between throughout the year. Um, which I personally like. But what advice can you give to parents on preparing their children? Um, really, uh, you know, with, or without disabilities, but let's keep on going back to school and just preparing them for that transition.

Amanda Morin (09:15):

That's such a big question, isn't it? I'm thinking that through and it's such a big question. I think there are a lot of things, um, one of the most important ones to me is to not downplay their anxieties and I know

that that might sound counterintuitive in some ways, but I think when we do rarely take the time to listen to it, kids are worried about we can help them figure out ways to work around it. So I think listening to kids anxieties can help parents sort of reset where their own anxieties are. I tried really hard in my house not to, to meet my kids since they. Are you worried about meeting a new teacher or are you worried because those are my worries, right? So in praying, hard to listen to them, but I also think it's important to sort of acknowledge your own anxieties and especially when you have a child who's going into fuel back to school and may have an IEP or a 500, four plan for me.

Amanda Morin (10:05):

I have, and you know, this, that I have three kids, two of whom have IDs, um, so we do this year after year after year and I always get nervous that there's going to be a time where I'm going to have to make sure that somebody who's read their IEP or knows their accompanying patients and I don't want to come across as confrontational or difficult or any of those kinds of ways. So I have to find a way to sort of bridge that connection with the teacher in a way that says, let me help you because this is going to be beneficial to everybody. If everybody understands the needs of my child so we can get everybody off to a good start. And I always try to find a way to do that. That's not pushy. And I'm not sure I always succeed, but I try really hard.

Amanda Morin (10:47):

Um, so I think for some parents it's a matter of just sending a quick email saying, hey, do you have questions about the IEP? Any questions I can answer about my child, anything you need to know from me before we start school? And then, um, sometimes I would recommend to parents that they can have their kids sit down with their kids and write an introduction letter to their teachers. And not necessarily they don't even have to send it. It's just an introduction letter so kids can have that sense of how they can talk about themselves to their teachers as well. And that parents sort of sort through what's important for the very beginning of the year. That's a very long answer. Um, it comes to some of the things.

Tim Villegas (11:23):

No, no, I like that. I liked that. I liked the, when, when I was a classroom teacher, I really liked having parents who, um, you know, and that there's a, there's also that kind of tone and, and, and um, attitude of just being open with the teacher and saying, Hey, I want you to know about my, about my child, you know, because they are my world and I want you to, I want you to know who they are. Um, and you can certainly do that without coming across too aggressive. And I thought I liked the intro letter ID. I think that's really, really great.

Amanda Morin (12:04):

And I think, you know, I think the important thing is to presume good intention from the very beginning. And I think that it's hard when you have spent a lot of time making sure your child has the supports they need to understand that other people have good intentions towards your child as well. Um, and I don't think that's necessarily that you're jaded or you feel like that they don't have good intentions. I think it's just, it's sometimes hard to realize that we're all working towards the same thing, which is to make a child successful and to help them be successful and thrive. And so for me, I always have to reset and say, okay, I'm presuming good intention, you know, this question that I may have heard may have come from somewhere that I'm not understanding and I need to think about the position, the teachers in our, you think about the position the other parent is in and, and sort of regroup and figure out how can I respond

to that in a way that shows that I understand they're trying hard and that they want the same thing that I do.

Tim Villegas (12:58):

I like that. I like that idea of pursuit, presuming good intentions and it's kind of like, well, I'm going to try. I'm going to try to connect it into this idea of, I'm presuming competence, because it's something that we, I guess in the inclusive education world or you know, however you want to say that a community is something that we talk about a lot is we're going to presume the competence of our students in not automatically jumped to the conclusion, well, they can't do this. They can't do that. They can't learn. Um, so I, I think that it's important to come to a new school year, uh, with that same sort of attitude. Um,

Amanda Morin (13:40):

and they do connect for me, I think of them sort of in the same way. It's sort of that keeping everybody accountable to high expectations. So if you're presuming competence, you're presuming that the child in your classroom can meet these high expectations. If you're presuming good intent, you're assuming that everybody around them can meet your high expectations of, of we're doing well, we're doing this for a good cause.

Tim Villegas (14:03):

Right? Right. And let's. And to further connect these, because the more that I think about it, I really liked. I really liked the way that this meshes. Yeah. When you have, when you have a student who already thinks that the teacher doesn't like them, doesn't think that they can learn and is already on the bad, you know, on bad footing to start the year, that student is not going to do well, right? Their behaviors, their behavior's going to, you know, the challenging behavior is going to crop up. There's going to be barriers to learning. Um, I think that that's, I think it's really important and something that I tell, I tell the teachers that I work with is, especially at the beginning of the year, is get to know your students. You know, that that seems pretty obvious, right? But, uh, but I think that I think that a lot of, a lot of educators just the, they know that there's a lot to cover. They want to get into standards right away. And, and so my advice to them is, look, you really have to know who your kids are so that you can get to the standards. You really have to know what their loves are with what they're passionate about. Um, the things and follow their lead for the beginning. Just so that you can develop that rapport because then if you invest all of that time, by the time you're two or three weeks in, they're going to trust you.

Amanda Morin (15:35):

Well, that connection is huge, isn't it? I mean, I, one of my sons is the kid that you definitely have to connect with before he can, before you've gained his trust. And you know, I, that's just the kid he is. And so I think the teachers that he has had not as easy a time with over the years are the teachers who have not taken the time to sort of see who he is or to ask him who he is. He's a very ridiculous sense of humor. He's a punter, so like we do in our house, which is ridiculous and fun. You know, that about him and you go in and you attack him with his sense of humor. Then he is putting in your hands for the rest of the year. He's your best ease, your best student. And um, but if you don't do that, if you don't get to know him well, he's going to be a challenge in, um, and I don't mean challenge in a way where it's like he needs to be out of your classroom.

Amanda Morin (16:31):

I just mean it's going to be challenging. So you, it's, it's a huge thing and I always want, I always taught when I taught, I always made sure that I tried to have a try to, to have my first contact with parents, be a positive one. Again, never wanted the first contact to be a column that says. So we've had a problem. I always wanted to be. I'm going to use my self, my name is Mrs and I'm going to be your child's teacher this year. Um, is there anything you want to tell me? Anything you want to ask me? Just so we have that started. So it wasn't like the first time you hear something, it's panic, you know, because it causes panic when you get a call when you don't know what's happening.

Tim Villegas (17:11):

Right, right. Exactly. Um, something else I wanted to, I wanted to talk about and discuss with you is we have some families who were going back to, I'm going transitioning back to school and their students are included for a portion or the majority of the day in like a co taught setting. Um, but then they also get pulled into a, um, a small group room or a special day class or however you want to say it. I know there's different ways. Say it around the country. Um, some parents may be concerned about as they get older, the school district or the school will, will say this content is getting too hard. Um, uh, we're, we're just not able to, you know, your, your child is not going to do as well as we go forward into fourth, fifth, sixth grade. We're really need to look at a more restrictive environment. I know that that is on the minds of parents as they go back to school. Um, do you have any advice to parents as they, as they prepare for those conversations and prepare for, uh, for that new school year?

Amanda Morin (18:38):

Yeah, those are scary conversations. And I think they're in the back of the head of so many parents. I was in the back of my head even as a parent a lot of the time. Um, and one of the things that I always want to tell parents is to really stick with asking about what's, what's happening now and what's the data that shows that this isn't going to work or hasn't been working. Um, that's kind of convoluted. But honestly, if it's working, if the supports that are in place that are, are working, if your child is succeeding and doing well and meeting goals in the, in the setting that they're already predicting the future from that is not really possible. You know, there has to be some evidence showing that this child needs to be moved to a more restricted environment. And so I think it's, it's really important for parents to know that they absolutely can, can ask that question, what data do you have that shows that this isn't working?

Amanda Morin (19:32):

Um, and I think the next question is, and what can we change in the present setting to try and make it work before we move to a more inclusive setting? Uh, I mean, excuse me, a more inclusive setting, a more restrictive setting. And I think that to that point, one of the things that's really important for parents to understand is the idea of least restrictive environment. And I think that, you know, I mean, you and I know that a lot of teachers know that but least instructive environment is in the law. The individuals with the individuals with disabilities and Education Act, Ida,

Tim Villegas (20:07):

that's hard to say

Amanda Morin (20:10):

that, that a child should be educated. Students should be educated in the least restrictive environment possible, which means they should be in a general education setting with their same age peers as much as possible with the support they need. So any work outside of that as a more restrictive environment. So the last sort of supports that if there were supports that can be put into place and your child can still succeed in that setting, that's the first thing to go to. And so I think a lot of parents are nervous speaking often seeing that they know that, I think they, they, it feels confrontational to say, well, I know that the law says my child deserves to be in a least restrictive environment, but it's really not, it's just, it's being informed, it's being assertive. It's showing that your, your understanding and willing to work with the team to figure out what other supports might be helpful to keep your child in the environment they're in.

Tim Villegas (21:02):

Yeah. I love the suggestions. I think, um, I think you're right on when you're talking about, um, about data because data is emotionless rate. It is, it is, doesn't have any baggage. So when you, when you say this is how my child was doing last year and uh, you know, why would we make that change to a more restrictive environment when they haven't shown that they're not able to perform or excel at the same rate that they were the year before, you know. And to that point, let's say, let's say they aren't, you know, performing, are excelling, are achieving at the same, at the same rate. Then we'll, why is that? Because they were last year, so I think you're right that, that the data question and the and asking why.

Amanda Morin (22:01):

I think too, you know, at the beginning of the year it's really important to keep in mind it's the beginning of the year just starting out and I, I know you know what I'm talking about here when it comes to data, the first three weeks of the school you really are, are not as accurate as the next six weeks, if you will, because what you're looking at is that getting used to and for some kids it's actually a honeymoon period where you don't see some of the things that you might see later on, but for other kids that might be an adjustment. So I think it's important to also not only look at data but look at how much data, right? So it's not just like, well in these two weeks this has been really difficult, but across time here are the things that we're seeing consistently is really important.

Tim Villegas (22:44):

Right, right. Exactly that. Yeah. That's great. Great Advice. So let me guess. You can put on your educator hat on, you're recovering educator hat on and I'm a, we get as far as, you know, the, the website and in people asking us questions, um, we get a lot of questions from educators who are in districts that, you know, maybe in the idea or the philosophy of inclusive education just isn't as big of a priority as it is for others. Um, and so we get a lot of questions about, you know, how can I turn things around in my district, who do I talk to, what do I do, uh, to promote inclusive practices. Is there anything, any strategies or ideas that you could give educators as they're, as they're listening to this conversation?

Amanda Morin (23:41):

Well, firstly, I would just like to apply to educators who are asking that question. I mean, it's a great question to ask and it shows that you're really, really involved in and ready to do it. And I think there are a couple of things. I think the first thing is make your own classroom as inclusive as you can. Right? So you're changing your classroom to meet your expectations and philosophies. And I also think that you need to, you need to acknowledge the systems in which you work sometimes and it can be frustrating, but I think making sure that you have a good relationship with the special education teachers and the

paraprofessionals who are there to support and asking about coteaching strategies as opposed to necessarily like pulling kids out. How can we do this in the classroom I think is always a great question to ask and to bring it up in an IEP meeting as well.

Amanda Morin (24:27):

I think not just when you know, I think just in front of everybody. It's a good question to ask, are there ways that we can do this in the classroom? What can I do to support that? Who's there, who can support me in doing that? And I also think I'm bringing parents into the conversation can be really helpful because if you have parents who believe in inclusion and they really want it to happen, they can start sort of a drive from the outside if you will. I don't even know how to say that, but that, that ability for parents to come in and speak to administration, whether it's superintendents or school boards and say this is really important to us. It supports you as a teacher. So I'm not saying like have an uprising because it's not what I'm suggesting at all. But I'm definitely saying make sure if you have parents who believe in this, that they can bring in all the information that they have.

Amanda Morin (25:12):

Um, it's funny, you and I both know Nicole Iridex who wrote the book inclusion in action. I think it's a fantastic book for teachers to read Lincoln's fantastic book for teachers to read and then gives you their, their student's parents to read as well. Um, it's actually we're doing a book club through understood dot Org and it's one of the books, the next book we're reading and having users talk to Nicole and, and that kind of thing because I think it just gives you practical strategies if. Well, it's literally called practical strategies, inclusion and action to really start adopting these practices in your classroom. And I think finding at least one more teacher who has the same belief can make you feel less alone in that and whether it's through a site like think inclusive or this podcast or a community on the ground, it may not matter where that, that support comes from at first. But I think it's important to know that there are other people who are trying this too and maybe hitting the same obstacles.

Tim Villegas (26:09):

Yes, that is exactly. That's exactly what turned me around. Um, because in my, in my, uh, teaching credential program, it was very inclusive. The, the strategies and the, the assumption was that you're going to go and you're going to get a job and you're going to be supporting students in, in settings with, with a typically developing kids. And when I got my first job, it was, it wasn't that I worked in a, I worked in a self contained special education classroom. And knowing all the information I had, I was at a complete loss. Well, how do I make what I know is his best practice? How do I make it work for my kids? And that was really the impetus of why, you know, I started the website because I just didn't know. I didn't know, I didn't know what I didn't know. So. Alright.

Tim Villegas (27:19):

And if you don't know what you don't know, you find people who know what you need to know. Right? Exactly. Exactly. And it was so encouraging to find other people who, who thought like I did because then I realized, oh, I'm not alone and um, and we can all work on this bigger idea together. And so I also want to encourage other self contained classroom teachers because I don't think you know, this Amanda, but I taught 13 years in the classroom, all of which were in self contained settings. Did Not know that. Wow. Yes. So, um, and I remember having conversations with, with certain people in our community and they said, well, why are you still there? And I said, well, I have, you know, I have mixed feelings, but I feel like for whatever reason I'm here and I'm going to like what you said, make my setting

as inclusive as possible and, and, and, you know, work. Um, what I felt was best for my students at my particular school and all the while trying to learn more and more strategies on how to affect the larger system. You know what I mean?

Amanda Morin (28:37):

Yeah, I do. And I, and I think that's important to know that, that it's not an all or nothing proposition, right? It's not, we're all inclusive or not inclusive. It's you can affect your piece of the world and that makes a big impact. It's like a ripple effect. Right. You know, and, and I know that sounds very pollyanna, but it's really true. It's always amazing to me to see, I mean like communities like ours, the ones that this inclusive community where just knowing each other, even if it's online, we've, we've, you know, we all sort of pick up the thread and make the difference in their teaching parents and other teachers and set little difference can really grow to a big movement. Um, and just because you can't see that the movement is coming, doesn't mean you're not building towards it.

Tim Villegas (29:22):

Right, right. Well, I certainly, I certainly hope that what we're doing is making a difference. I believe that, uh, yeah, yeah, my job to believe. Um, well, uh, I just want to make sure everyone knows where they can find you as far as following your, you know, tweets and you know, I don't know if you're on facebook as, as the author. Okay. So give us your details.

Amanda Morin (29:57):

Sure. Yeah. So I'm really easy. I'm at Amanda Morgan and Morgan is m o r l n on twitter. So I'm just at Amanda Morin and on Facebook I am Amanda Morin, author and consultant, which is a big, fancy way of saying this is my professional page. Um, so it's, I think it's facebook.com backslash abandoned more and teachers if you're looking for it. And I have all sorts of other social media that I am really lax and using so I probably shouldn't promote it.

Tim Villegas (30:26):

That's fine. That's fine.

Amanda Morin (30:30):

Pretty active on twitter and also you can find me like I do a lot of writing and blogging@understood.org. So I'm, I'm always sort of writing about my experiences and putting new things out there. Um, and that's easy to find too.

Tim Villegas (30:41):

Yes, yes. And um, and for those of you don't know or don't, aren't familiar with understood.org, it is a, it's fantastic the resources that are on there including video, which I know it can be sometimes more engaging for some people and um, and I know that it's, it's just a really excellent, really warehouse of resources.

Amanda Morin (31:07):

It's built in accessibility tools to which I always feel like important is important to mention. This has like a built in predisposed that. So it's there. If you're accessing information differently, we're built for you.

The understood that arcsight is. Um, and I'm very proud of that. I will tell you that that's something that I think is important.

Tim Villegas (31:25):

Fantastic. Um, okay. Well, I'd like to thank Amanda Morin for being on the fake inclusive podcast. Thank you for your time.

Amanda Morin (31:34):

Thank you for having me on.

Tim Villegas (31:36):

That is our show. We would like to thank Amanda Morin for being a guest on the think inclusive podcast. Make sure to follow her on twitter and facebook and looked for her work on understood.org. Follow. Think inclusive on the web at thinking inclusive that us as well as twitter. Facebook, Google plus and instagram. Today's show was produced by myself using an sm 58 USB logitech headset, zoom h one handy recorder, Mac book pro, Garageband in a skype account. You can also subscribe to the thing conclusive podcasts via apple podcasts, Google play, stitcher for Anchor Dot FM. The easiest way to start a podcast from Marietta, Georgia. Please join us again on the thinking podcast. Thanks for your time and attention.

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