

It doesn't have to be all or nothing

By Tabitha Wells

The past couple of months, the debate about plastic straws has been raging, in some ways rightly so. Tackling the environment and the challenges facing it is an important conversation that needs to be ongoing. The problem comes into play when tackling the environment seems to have been part of fads, and when those fads ignore the needs of people who are impacted by total bans. Take for example, plastic bags. The end goal was that plastic bags would be used far less, because people would have to pay extra for them. And while some people did certainly switch, plastic bags are still everywhere. Seriously. We hang onto them for reuse, and even when using our cloth bags, we still have a huge container of them. As does pretty much everyone else I know.

Wanting to improve the environment and tackle overuse of plastics and trash is a good thing. But when the manner in which it is being done drastically and negatively affects certain groups, it should give pause to reconsider.

That is the issue we find ourselves facing with all of these plastic straw bans.

Let's start with stating the obvious -- it does not have to be an all or nothing. Not banning them doesn't mean encouraging excessive use or not working to limit the number of plastic straws out there.

Whether we want to admit it or not, there are a number of people who rely on single-use plastic straws in their everyday lives. There are reasons plastic straws are used in hospitals (and it's not just the cost issue). Single-use plastic straws are used by people with disabilities, neurological disorders, non-neurotypicals, dementia, and basically anything else that limits either mobility or the ability to consume foods and liquids like those of us who are abled can.

Of course, there are always a large number of answers given to what they could use instead, or what other people believe they should use instead. Rather than listening to what this community is saying, people want to tell them what they should do, even amidst their reasons why alternatives cannot always work.

Perhaps the most abhorrent view I have seen is from people who have made statements along the lines of "if people with disabilities want to be part of society, then it's their job to learn how to adapt, not ours to cater to them."

Can we sit on that for a moment? A person who is at a disadvantage for whatever reason must do the work to make themselves suitable, not those who are able assisting to provide equity. Perhaps the most devastating thing about this mentality is that it's not just online comment sections I have seen this very sentiment uttered by people in our own community.

Accommodating people with disabilities shouldn't be something we see as a burden. Have we gone back so far in time these past few years that we believe they are less deserving of being welcomed to public spaces than we are? Sometimes, that's how it can feel.

Particularly when it comes to this straw debate, continuing to accommodate for people who require straws does not mean having to provide them for everybody and simply disregarding the environmental impact.

The current existing alternatives, while they may work for some with disabilities, do not work for many of them. Some of the reasons include the following:

Metal straws: First and foremost, they're not adaptable to temperatures. Hot or cold drinks can burn or chill, as well as cause mouth injuries for those with heat and cold intolerances. Flexibility is a major issue as well, as some people with disabilities require flexibility due to limited mobility. People who suffer from tremors can suffer lip, tooth, and gum injuries.

Reusable plastic straws: Not everyone has the ability to wash, dry, or carry straws everywhere. Reusing them will require proper sanitation; simply rinsing isn't always a good solution depending on what is consumed, and not being able to dry them can breed bacteria.

Paper/bamboo/biodegradable straws: Some people are unable to drink quickly enough, so the straws dissolve before they can finish. They're also not suitable for hot drinks.

The above options also become even more difficult when dealing with people with sensory issues and allergies.

Those of us advocating for keeping plastic straws available for those who need them aren't saying nobody should look into alternatives. In fact, we think the opposite. But the pressure should be on the manufacturers to find suitable options that aren't dangerous to people with disabilities, rather than putting the pressure on people with disabilities to have to adapt.

Battling on behalf of the environment is a process. Making sure people are aware plastic straws are available upon request is not going to derail the mission of fixing the environment. However, eliminating straws isn't really going to take it to the level people are claiming it will either. There are so many other things, especially plastics, that are still a major issue (hello plastic cups...plates...forks?).

So, rather than making an already difficult life even more difficult, could we not work together to provide them with the resources they need while working together to come up with a solution that truly impacts the environment AND works for people with

disabilities?

For anyone interested in learning more about how this affects people with disabilities, and why more discussion is needed, I have compiled a list of resources and published them: <http://tabithawells.com/resources-on-plastic-straws/>.