Yours, Mine, and Ours
Including All Children in the Early Childhood Classroom
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In 1975, Public Law 94-142 (PL 94-142), known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, ensured children with disabilities have the opportunity to be educated in the public school setting. In 1990, 1997, and 2004, PL 94-142 was reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA mandates that any child with a disability has the right to receive his or her education in the least restrictive environment. This means that students with disabilities, to the maximum extent possible, are to be educated in the same instructional environment as students without disabilities. The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps (TASH) states “... Inclusion implies more than just physical presence; it includes access to the curriculum that is taught in the regular education classroom.” (Yaoying Xu)

An increasing number of children with disabilities are being cared for in community early childhood settings. Most early childhood professionals approach inclusion with open minds and open hearts, but many may still be anxious about how to meet the individual needs of all students within an inclusive early childhood setting. It may be helpful to remember that children with disabilities are children first and have a disability second. They have the same feelings, basic health needs, and desire for social belonging, and benefit from the same experiences that are desirable for all children.

What characterizes effective inclusive early childhood environments? Inclusive early childhood environments ensure that all children have access to the same curriculum, materials, activities, teachers, and peers while providing "an educational setting in which all
children can be as involved and independent as possible” (Winter, 2009). Successful involvement of students with disabilities in an inclusive early childhood setting can be accomplished by implementing basic accommodations and modifications throughout activities in a typical early childhood daily schedule, including large group (circle time), small group, snack time, center time, and transition times.

*Large Group (Circle Time)*

Large group provides a place of comfort and predictability for children. Teachers use circle time to focus the students at the beginning of the day, after centers or after outdoor play. Children benefit from circle time by gathering with everyone at the same time to share stories, sing, and talk with their friends and teacher. Suggestions for including children with disabilities in circle time include:

- Provide preferred seating near an adult, at the front of the group, or in an area on the carpet where the child can stretch his legs. Some children feel additional security sitting in a chair instead of on the carpet.
- Giving the child a “fidget” toy, such as a small car or squish ball, to manipulate while she’s on the carpet.
- Provide the child a break by allowing him to sit on his knees, turn and face a quite area of the classroom, or move around the perimeter of the circle and then return to his spot.
- Provide a physical prompt (i.e. gently touching the child on the arm) or visual prompt (a picture of her sitting on the carpet) to help redirect the child to the activity.

*Small Group*

During this time of the day, the teacher meets with a few students at a time, which provides a wonderful opportunity for exploring materials and concepts, learning new skills, making choices and communicating with students about what they are learning. Strategies for including all children in small group may include:

- Provide a visual schedule of what will happen during small group including when it starts and when it ends.
- Provide preferred seating near an adult with sensory supports in place such as a chair with tennis balls on the legs to prevent squeaky noises when the chair moves. Tennis balls can also be placed on diagonally opposite legs of a chair to allow the child to quietly rock in the chair.
- Limit the number of objects introduced to the student. (A whole bag full of blocks can be intimidating at first, but given a few at a time the child has adequate opportunity to explore the blocks in a more relaxed way.)
- Use simple, concrete language to describe the objects or activity and allow additional wait time for the child to process the information.

**Snack Time**

Snack time is an important part of the day to promote language development, self help skills, healthy eating habits, and social skills improvement in a supportive setting. The teacher encourages a sense of competence and independence in students by offering opportunities for students to make choices, wait their turn, set the table, and serves themselves. Accommodations during snack time could include:

- Provide structure and predictability by allowing the child to sit at the same spot at the table each day.
- Use a placemat, a cafeteria tray, or tape to define a child’s space at the table.
- Provide choices (for example, “Do you want to eat a cracker or apple first?”).
- Provide adaptive spoons, bowls, serving utensils, or pitchers if needed.

**Center Time**

Center time provides the opportunity for students to acquire new skills, extend previously learned skills, experiment with materials, and engage in social interactions with their peers. When preschool children are fully engaged in their play they can enhance their social, emotional, language, cognitive and motor development. Approaches to including students with disabilities during centers might include:

- Providing open ended art activities.
- Adapt crayons, markers, paintbrushes, and pencils as needed for children to better grasp common classroom tools.
- Add textures and/or fragrances to the paint in the art center to heighten sensory awareness (i.e. lemon, vanilla, sand or salt).
- Allow the child to sit or kneel while working in the art center or the sensory table.
• Define the child’s work space in the block center using a small carpet or tape.
• Model language concepts such as big, small, full and empty.
• Provide pictures of the various toys and center areas to allow the child to make choices as to what or where he wants to play. It is sometimes necessary to limit the number or type of choices.

Transition times

In the early childhood classroom, transition times are the times throughout the day when students move from one activity to another. This typically includes arrival time moving to and from circle time, centers, and snack time; cleaning up after different activities; going outdoors; and dismissal time. When transitions are planned and meaningful, they can provide children with opportunities to engage independently to the greatest extent possible in different activities with a variety of adults and peers. Ideas for supporting children with disabilities during transitions include:

• Provide a visual schedule of when the transitions will take place.
• Provide an auditory cue (bell, songs) when it’s time to move from one activity to the next.
• If the child has difficulty leaving one activity and moving on to the next, let the child carry an item from one area of the room to the next.

Inclusion is an ongoing process that begins in the preschool classroom by allowing each student to be “welcomed and embraced as a member who belongs” (Colleen F. Tomko). Providing all children with the opportunity to engage, learn, socialize and communicate with peers in inclusive early childhood environments paves the way for an inclusive society in which adults with and without disabilities live and work together as contributing members in their community.
References


Bibliography


Downing, June. *Including Students with Severe and Multiple Disabilities in Typical Classrooms, Practical Strategies for Teachers.* Paul H. Brooks Publishing 2002
