

## Suggestions for the Exceptional Learner ♥

Every child needs and wants to experience success. All children have potential and all children are capable of learning. The potentials and capabilities will differ, but they are always there. Exceptional children require a bit of extra effort to keep them learning, engaged, and focused. The same holds true for special needs children. This section provides practical advice on how to create an engaging environment in order to meet the diverse needs of all the learners in the kindergarten classroom.

In the early childhood and kindergarten classroom, the teacher is constantly evaluating the development of the children and reporting to the parents about their child's developmental progress. The progressive nature of development is the same in every child – but always at a different rate. If the teacher is knowledgeable about the various stages of child development, s/he is very well prepared for working with all children, even exceptional and special needs children. The aspects of child development are the same no matter who the child is. Exceptional and special needs children may not reach “typical” milestones at the same rate as “typical” children, but the sequence of development remains the same.

A developmentally appropriate classroom for “typical” children is also a developmentally appropriate classroom for the majority of exceptional and special needs children. Often, no changes will have to be made.

The concept of developmental appropriateness has two dimensions. *Age appropriateness* refers to the knowledge of child development which provides a framework from which teachers prepare the learning environment and plan appropriate experiences. *Individual appropriateness* refers to the planned learning experiences that match the child's developing abilities while also challenging the child's interest, understanding, and critical thinking skills.

A developmentally appropriate classroom offers curriculum design and implementation based on child development theories that promote child-initiated, teacher-guided, active learning. Exceptional and special need learners need a strong focus on individualization through the identification of each child's strengths, interests, and needs in an effort to adapt the environment for optimal individual growth.

Successful classroom management includes the following strategies:

- **Predictability & consistency** (illustrated schedules, concurrent group times, routines and rules for security, control and trust)
- **Organization** (personal space, pictures on shelves, tactile shelf labels, trays, and mats for reassurance)
- **Familiar objects and images** (photos and stuffed animals for trust & belonging)

- **Collaborative games/activities** (for building social skills, relationships, empathy and tolerance)
- **Clearly defined play/work areas** (traffic patterns and minimized distraction to invite peer participation) (for wheelchairs: bolsters on the floor & adjusted table heights; special chairs, standing tables)
- **Duplicated materials** (exploration options, rotation of materials, for cooperation vs. competition)
- **Soothing and relaxing materials** (play dough, sand, water, blocks, and art supplies for building cooperation, social skills, and relationships)
- **Expectations for independence** (limited choices, a set place for everything, adaptations to materials, individualized attention, all of the above)
- **Communication boards for all children in the dramatic play area** (All levels of verbal abilities will benefit through exposure to print, visual cues, expanded vocabulary and types of phrases expressed.)
- **Effective supervision** (using visual, auditory and physical presence)
- **Volunteers** (foster grandparents, student interns, community service students, parent volunteers)

Successful classroom instruction includes the following strategies:

- Knowledge of child development allows for observant comprehension of past, current, and future capabilities of each child.
- Errorless learning techniques result from purposefully planned lessons focused on the current level of ability and interests of the children and use successive approximations to guide them toward progress. A successful classroom environment (developmentally appropriate) is characterized by the teacher's ability to:
  - Know present level of ability for each child.
  - Compare current performance with past performance.
  - Identify the next realistic level of ability.
  - Foster progress while avoiding chain errors, aversive learning, prompt dependency, delayed antecedents and misused learning time.
  - Observe and document behavior and progress based on realistic expectations and "errorless learning."
  - Again, identify the next realistic level of ability for each child..

*Errorless learning* is when the teacher delivers an antecedent and either prompts immediately (zero-second time delay) or waits a beat for the child's response. If

the child *begins* to give an incorrect response, or fails to respond, the teacher immediately prompts the correct response and offers praise. The same antecedent is then presented again, this time as a transfer trial (meaning it's an attempt to have the child respond correctly *without* the prompt or with *less* of a prompt). If the child answers correctly independently, the teacher reinforces more strongly and continues the lesson. However, if the child again begins to respond incorrectly, the teacher quickly prompts again. Then, leaving the error-producing antecedent, the lesson continues for a few trials to other targets in an effort to increase independently initiated correct responses. After several correct responses, the teacher returns to the missed target to try for an independent response, again prompting and trying for a transfer trial as necessary.

- *Thematic project approaches to learning.* Projects give teachers a structure in which to plan and implement engaging curriculum, teach through play and exploration, document children's actions and language, and use these documents to assess children's abilities, interests, and needs. And including the project approach in teacher education programs may also help prepare teachers to include children with special needs and differing abilities in their classrooms.
  
- *Purposefully planned regular activities.* These are planned first before planning extension and special activities. Do not assume that the child with exceptional or special needs requires something different; start with those activities that are planned for all children. The teacher may need only to encourage the child to participate, or give some assistance. When special activities are necessary, they should be planned to include other children who do not have an exceptional skill or need. Under some circumstances it may be necessary to plan special, separate activities solely for the child with exceptional or special needs. However, this should only be done if activities with a group are not appropriate or successful.