Accommodating Special Needs

This section on accommodations is not about the need for "typical" classrooms to be inclusive of special needs children. Every child needs and wants to experience success, and those with special needs are no different. This section is designed to help make mainstreaming successful should a teacher be blessed with the opportunity to work with a special needs child. In the next few pages, an attempt will be made to help reduce the anxiety associated with mainstreaming young children by giving teachers specific strategies for inclusion plans.

Types of Disabilities	
Mental	Exceptional children require extra effort to keep them learning, engaged, and focused. The same holds true for special needs children.
Emotional	Emotional needs have two behavioral extremes as well: from the needy to the aggressive.
Social	• Non-English speaker • Autism spectrum disorder • A-social refers to the lack of desire to have social connections • Anti-social refers to inappropriate behaviors
Physical	• Orthopedic disabilities such as cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, spina-bifida. • Health impairments such as asthma, HIV, cystic fibrosis, heart problems. • Developmental disabilities such as mental retardation, learning disabilities, or exceptional abilities can result in speech/language, auditory, visual or other health issues.
Spiritual	The disconnected restlessness resulting from insecurities.

The Teacher's Role

Teachers often fear if a special needs child is accepted into the program, then additional special needs children will follow and possibly children with severe disabilities. This is not the reality, though. Parents who have children with light to moderate needs often seek the least restrictive environment for their child, while those with children of profound challenges and needs opt for programs designed specifically for their child.

One fact to keep in mind is that mainstreaming is not for every one and it is sometimes not appropriate or successful. It will take a bit of effort for inclusion to be successful, but that is true with any child.

All children need purposeful planning for their development, but this is especially true of children with special needs. This often requires meeting with other professionals who share the responsibility of training and working with the child. Individualized Education Plans (IEP) are necessary for collaboration and successful implementation of the plans for the child.

Ideally, as many special services as possible should be brought to the center. The need for transportation to another facility for services is avoided, and the teachers within the center are then exposed to other ideas and practices helpful and appropriate for other children – regardless of "need". Most of the educational techniques used with special needs children work wonderful wonders with "typical" children. They are well worth learning!

Feelings

Feelings re: Special Needs

Avoidance
Discomfort
Fear
Sadness or pity
Vulnerability
Denial
Resentment
Guilt
Anger
Unpreparedness

Initially, being around special needs children can be uncomfortable. Adults tend to either feel pity for the child or disdain. Other emotions surface also, depending on past experiences or the lack of past experiences with special needs children. Many times, people are afraid they may say or do something wrong. Remember, all children have potential, and all children are capable of learning.
What these children need and want is no different from other children (Chandler, 1993):

- Acceptance for who they are, the way they are – no different from any other person!
- Permission to be who they are without rescuing or demanding.
- Realistic expectations about the child‟s abilities and the strengths and limits of the teacher.
- Appreciation for the contribution they make to the group as a whole.
- Someone to believe in them and their potential.

Preparing For the Special Needs Child

Again, inclusion is not right for every special needs child, nor is it possible with every teacher. The match must be made with careful deliberation and consideration (Chandler, 1993). The teacher has to be willing and motivated. The child has to be evaluated for appropriate placement. In addition, the parents of the "typical" children in the classroom have to be accepting – otherwise the problem of prejudice will creep into the classroom and create larger issues.

Once the teacher, administrator, and family have agreed that a specific child would work well in a particular setting, then the process of preparation and inclusion can begin.

There are many options for inclusion. Depending on the circumstances, part time attendance may be preferable to full time attendance. For instance, it may work best to have the special needs child attend only half a day rather than all day. Such decisions will need to be addressed prior to enrollment.

Attitude

Attitude is very important in making inclusion a success. Early childhood educators are constantly evaluating the development of the children in our care and reporting to the parents about their child‟s developmental progress. The developmental process is the same in every child – but always at a different rate. Special needs children may not reach "typical" milestones at the same rate as "typical" children, but the sequence of development remains the same (Chandler, 1993). An early childhood professional knowledgeable of the developmental process in young children is well prepared for working with all children, even those with special needs.

The Child

Just as with any other client, the decision to enroll special needs children into a program should be done on an individual basis. The decision should weigh the benefits to the child, family and center with the available resources, skills, and teacher willingness. Meet the family and child before enrollment and encourage them to visit the center several times – just as any other family would. Discuss the child‟s schedule of attendance. Get acquainted with the other involved individuals. Focus primarily on the child‟s possibilities, not his/her disability. Learn about the child‟s background, specific disability or special need. Avoid stereotyping: even children with the same syndrome differ greatly in their ability levels (Chandler, 1993).

One word of caution: there are federal and state laws governing privacy. Be sure to learn and respect the privacy rights of clientele.

Reality Check

Not every challenged child can be successfully mainstreamed into a "typical" classroom. Avoid blaming unwilling teachers. Be grateful that they recognize their limitations. Respect their honesty and candidness and be grateful that a negative experience was avoided.

The number of children with disabilities or other special needs in a program should reflect a balance between the program‟s resources and the needs of each child (Chandler, 1993). Sometimes a behavior problem is more dangerous than the benefits of inclusion. That is when the teacher and administrator must be honest about their resources and make the appropriate decision for all those involved – including all the other children and staff that might be at risk due to an aggressive child.

The Classroom

A developmentally appropriate classroom for "typical" children is also a developmentally appropriate classroom for the majority of special needs children that will enroll in your program. Often, no changes will have to be made.

"…[I]t is easiest to integrate children with special needs into groups where a wide range of abilities are already present and accepted" (Chandler, 1993, p. 23). Then, if necessary, make adaptations to the classroom environment, materials, and activities in order to better meet the child"s needs.

Making Inclusion Successful

Every child needs and wants to experience success, and those with special needs are no different. For inclusion to be successful, it must be a positive experience for children with special needs and children with typical needs, as well as the teacher and parents. The teacher may need to plan more carefully to ensure that each child succeeds in the learning activities provided in the classroom. Remember to compare children with their past performances rather than with their peers (Chandler, 1993). Planning and identifying successful learning experiences for the child will enhance the teacher"s feelings of satisfaction as well (Chandler, 1993).

Making Inclusion Successful

Purposefully plan lessons
Compare child"s performance with past
Know the present level of ability
Identify the next realistic level of ability
Observe behavior and progress
Supervise effectively
Regular activities first
Encourage independence

Teachers need to be keenly aware of each child"s present level of ability and how to help each learn and move to the next realistic level. This is where knowledge of child development is crucial. Only then can the teacher provide the necessary experiences and support for the children"s learning.

Knowing child development will also help the teacher to identify which behaviors are age-appropriate and which ones are related to a child"s disability (Chandler, 1993). For example: Is this child"s lack of verbal communication normal for age 2 or related to a disability? The teacher has a serious responsibility to observe behavior and progress and provide effective supervision.

Purposefully Planned Lessons

When planning activities for the child with special needs start with those that are planned for all children (Chandler, 1993). The child with special needs does not always require something different. He/she may only need to be encouraged to participate, or given some assistance. When special activities are necessary, they should be planned to include other children who do not have a disability (Chandler, 1993). "Under some circumstances it may be necessary to plan special, separate activities solely for the child with special needs. However, this should only be done if activities with a group are not appropriate or successful" (Chandler, 1993, p. 38).

When special activities are necessary, they should be provided in addition to, not instead of, regular program activities (Chandler, 1993). Always encourage the special needs children to participate as fully as possible in class activities, and supplement with

specialized instruction only when necessary (Chandler, 1993).

It is important that a child with special needs have every opportunity to do things independently (Chandler, 1993). Children thrive in situations where adults encourage them to select their own materials and initiate their own play and work activities. Through verbal and non-verbal cues, teachers can encourage and teach children independence. It is not in their best interest to do things for them when they are capable. Overprotection, "babyfication", and indulgence can be detrimental to their growth and character development. It is far better and much more rewarding for them, if teachers encourage independence and efforts at independence.

Successful Mainstreaming

Just as there are two components to the developmentally appropriate classroom, there are two components to successful mainstreaming. The presence of a child with special needs in a regular classroom is described as "physical integration" (Chandler, 1993). "The interaction between children with special and typical needs is called social integration" (Chandler, 1993, p. 38).

Although physical inclusion is positive and necessary for social integration to occur, it is social integration that yields the greatest benefits (Chandler, 1993). Physical inclusion does not guarantee that social integration will take place or be effective and beneficial (Chandler, 1993). It may be necessary for the teacher to plan integration experiences and activities to help foster the initial interactions between the children (Chandler, 1993).

Children often respond more positively to other children than they do to "helpful" adults and therapists. This is not a reflection on the adults; it is simply an example of relational bonding between children. Other children are wonderful facilitators of learning for the children with special needs (Chandler, 1993). In addition, the children with typical needs usually like to be included in special activities and may feel left out if such activities are not available to them. Sharing activities provides positive social interaction and allows everyone to share their abilities and strengths.

Finally, if teachers are accepting of special needs children and relate to them in the same manner as to other children, they will already have provided most of what is needed for successful integration. After that, careful observation and occasional intervention will help in reaching the goal of integration and provide a positive early childhood experience for all the children in the program (Chandler, 1993).

Children of Typical Development Need:

Supportive, accepting adults
Established rules
Factual information
Questions answered
Guided perceptions (books, toys, pictures, props, misc. objects)
Praise
Opportunities to explore
Pair peers
Situational interpretation

Children of Typical Development

One of the major reasons for including children with special needs in a typical early childhood

program is the opportunity it provides for the "development of positive attitudes among typical children and their families toward others who may be „different" in some way" (Chandler, 1993, p. 43). Often, because of their lack of prejudice, this acceptance and understanding happens naturally. However, teachers and administrators can promote the process of acceptance and understanding through some simple techniques.

The attitude of significant adults in the program is most important. Adults provide not only the physical environment, but also the social and emotional environment, including attitudes and values (Chandler, 1993). "If the program administrator is not supportive of inclusion, it is unlikely to be successful. If the teacher believes that children with special needs should be in special care and education settings, she will not support their [inclusion and] integration into her classroom (Chandler, 1993, p. 44).

Children are influenced and tend to imitate the behaviors, attitudes, and words of adults who are important in their lives (Chandler, 1993). They do not have the same level of awareness that adults do about the special needs of other children. They need to be given "factual information in response to their questions" (Chandler, 1993, p. 45). It is important to be matter-of-fact about differences and realities without overwhelming with too much information (Chandler, 1993). In order to avoid misconceptions, teachers will need to initiate conversations, intervene in situations, and give helpful tips, advice, and explanations. The actions of teachers and administrators must be honest and consistent in order for the children to see consistency (Chandler, 1993).

Another way teachers can help children with typical needs develop positive attitudes toward those with special needs is to recognize and acknowledge the abilities of the child with special needs and teach the other children to do the same (Chandler, 1993). Should teachers observe negative behaviors and attitudes toward the special needs child, they should intervene and explain circumstances without hesitation (Chandler, 1993).

The children will become more comfortable and accepting of those with special needs if they are encouraged to examine and explore any special equipment used by the child with special needs. "Wheelchairs, walkers, braces, and other equipment should be available for children to experiment with. Their use must be closely supervised so damage will not occur," but exploration "is an important part of the process of understanding and accepting children with special needs" (Chandler, 1993, p. 49).

Working with Parents

Parents are the first and most important teachers of their own children. The support and involvement of parents is necessary for any inclusion plan to be successful(Chandler, 1993).

Parents of children with special needs often experience greater levels of stress in their lives than do other parents (Chandler, 1993). Also, there is a larger financial burden placed upon them due to the needs of the child (Chandler, 1993). Teachers and administrators who show compassion for the challenges these families face can be a

tremendous asset and witness to the family (Chandler, 1993).

“It is often difficult for parents of children with special needs to know what to expect of their children” (Chandler, 1993, p. 56). They look forward to their child reaching developmental milestones but are often disappointed at the delay or apparent lack of development (Chandler, 1993). This makes it difficult for them to set appropriate expectations for their child. This is where the early childhood teacher can be of great benefit to the family. By sharing the sequence of development, early childhood teachers can help the parents recognize that their child is making progress and growing. Then together, they can set realistic expectations and support strategies for the next level of development.

The other set of parents that you must deal with are those of the “typical” children. First of all, handle the enrollment process of a special needs child as routinely as you would that of any other child. Calling parent meetings and sending home notes or newsletters send out the wrong signals – they are warning signs and red flags to the other parents. Second, educate parents and reassure them that the needs of the children will be responded to and met. Parents may need additional reassurance of the teacher‟s diligent observation skills to ensure that their child‟s development and behavior will not be adversely affected by the special needs child (Chandler, 1993).

What early childhood education has to offer is developmentally appropriate practices in curriculum design and implementation based on child development theories that promote child-initiated, teacher-guided, active learning. What special education brings is 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. What better combination could there be?

Specific Strategies for the Teacher	
STRATEGY	**EXAMPLES**
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 stuffies for trust & belonging; favorite comfort toy/object
Collaborative games/activities	For building social skills, relationships, empathy and tolerance
Clearly defined play/work areas	Traffic patterns, minimized distraction, invitations for peer participation & interaction; for wheelchairs: bolsters on the floor & table heights adjusted; special chairs, standing tables
Duplicate 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	Limit choices, a set place for everything, adaptations to materials, individualized attention, all the above
Searches for volunteers	Foster grandparents, student interns, community service students, parent volunteers

Resources

Chandler, Phyllis. (1993). A Place for Me. Early Childhood Training Center, 6949 S. 110th St., Omaha, NE 68128-5722; Ph: 402-597-4820 or 1-800-89-CHILD

Mary Donegan, Seong Bock Hong, Mary Trepanier-Street, & Caryn Finkelstein. (2005). "Exploring How Project Work Enhances Student Teachers‟ Understanding of Children with Special Needs." Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 26, (1). pp.37-46

IDEA 2004 News, Information and Resources
News, information and resources on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), the nation's law that works to improve results for infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities:

http://school.discovery.com/schrockguide/edspec.html
http://school.discovery.com/schrockguide/edspec.html
http://school.discovery.com/schrockguide/edspec.html
http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/curriculum/pep/pz.html
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http://www.nichcy.org/resources/curriculum1.asp
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http://www.nichcy.org/pubs/outprint/nd15txt.htm
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http://www.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/idea2004.html