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Beginnings

Places for ALL Children: Building Environments for Differing Needs

by Diane Trister Dodge

Increasing inclusion of children with differing abilities in early childhood classrooms is one of the most exciting developments in education today. It reflects the coming together of two professions, each of which has a strong tradition to contribute. What early childhood education has to offer is developmentally appropriate practice: how to design curriculum and implement a program based on child development theory that promotes child-initiated and active learning. What special education brings is a strong focus on individualizing: identifying each child's strengths, interests, and needs in order to adapt the curriculum to promote individual growth.

While the move to inclusion may have begun as an issue of simple justice, we are now beginning to understand and appreciate the far ranging benefits of inclusion for everyone involved. All children learn best in an environment appropriate for their individual stage of development, an environment that emphasizes initiative and active exploration. Studies have shown that children with special needs, in particular, thrive in situations where adults encourage them to select their own play materials and initiate their own actions, and when adults respond to children's actions and encourage verbal and nonverbal communication.

The opportunities for all children to develop socially and cognitively are greatly enhanced in a classroom that acknowledges and builds respect for diversity. And for teachers, inclusion of children with special needs offers opportunities to enrich the curriculum by helping children to learn about and accept differences.

The Need for Thoughtful Planning

Successful inclusion, however, doesn't just happen. Careful thought and planning are required to ensure that the physical and social environments in the child care setting make all children feel accepted and competent.

The arrangement of furniture and the organization of materials has a profound effect on children's behavior and learning. A well organized classroom, adapted where needed to address special needs, can make it possible for all children to function with increasing independence and self-control.

Equally important as a strategy for successful inclusion is the social environment of the classroom — how teachers and children interact and how children relate to each other. Children will be naturally curious about each other's differences and may not know how to respond to one another. The **Anti-bias Curriculum** states: "Contact by itself does not necessarily reduce non-disabled children's misconceptions or fears — it may even intensify them — unless adults take active steps to promote children's learning about each other" (Derman-Sparks and ABC Task Force).

Attention to the physical and social environments of the classroom to ensure the successful inclusion of children with differing abilities addresses several important goals: helping children develop a sense of trust and belonging, developing the ability to accept and work cooperatively with others, enhancing children's independence, and increasing children's ability to stay involved in their work. The strategies

for building an environment to meet these goals apply equally to all children. However, some specific adaptations may be needed to address specific needs. Each of these goals and some strategies for achieving them are described in this article (based in part on **The New Room Arrangement as a Teaching Strategy**, see references).

Promoting a Sense of Trust and Belonging

Children are more likely to trust and feel they belong in a new environment if it includes familiar objects and images. The greater the difference between the child's environment outside the child care setting and the classroom environment, the more important it is to ensure that children see themselves, and images of persons like themselves, in the classroom.

A prominent bulletin board display might feature a photograph of each child in the class and each staff member, thus graphically conveying the message that each person is an equally important member of the classroom community. Teachers can help children to locate their own pictures and to identify other members of the class. A good discussion for circle time might be to have children identify all the ways that we are the same, and all the ways that we are different.

In selecting books, toys, pictures to display, and props for dramatic play, it's important to include relevant objects and pictures of people with different needs, just as you would to reflect cultural differences. For example, stories about and including people with differing abilities should be included in the book area, and adaptive equipment such as braces or hearing devices might be placed in the classroom so that children can try them out in their play.

For children who have limited control over many aspects of their lives, predictability and consistency is especially important for developing a sense of trust. A consistent schedule and set of routines helps children feel secure and in control. When children can refer to the schedule, they know what to expect throughout the day. Illustrating the schedule can be helpful for most children.

A classroom environment that is neat and well organized reassures children that they can find things in the same place each day. This is especially important for children with visual problems who will function more independently when the space and materials are arranged predictably. Having a place to keep their personal belongings that they can reach on their own conveys to children that their belongings will be safe and protected.

Circle time activities can help children function as a member of the group and experience a sense of belonging. Meetings should be short, no more than 10 to 15 minutes in the beginning of the year. Arranging everyone in a circle ensures that children and adults can see and be seen by all members of the group. The designated area for circle time must be large enough to avoid crowding the children, but not so large that they will find it hard to participate or feel a part of the action. A rug or carpet squares in the meeting area make sitting more comfortable. If children need guidance on where and how to sit, the carpet squares can be arranged prior to the meeting, or tape can be placed on the floor to indicate the seating arrangement.

Helping Children Learn to Work Cooperatively with Others

An important goal of inclusion is helping children of all backgrounds and abilities to live and work together. To achieve this goal, organize the environment so that children can work successfully in small groups, and actively teach children social skills.

Arranging the classroom into attractive and clearly defined interest areas with sufficient space to accommodate two to four children invites children to work with their peers. A soft rug makes a comfortable place to spread out, and it absorbs sounds that can be distracting for children with hearing impairments. To accommodate non-ambulatory children in wheelchairs, bolsters may be needed on the floor, and table heights may need to be adjusted for wheelchairs and other equipment.

Providing duplicates of materials minimizes the demands on children to share, thus avoiding potential fights and disagreements. Ample supplies of materials such as markers and table blocks encourage children to share materials and use them cooperatively. Materials that can be used in many ways such as play dough, sand, water, blocks, and art supplies are soothing and relaxing for children, thereby naturally encouraging them to work together.

Teachers set a tone of acceptance and, when necessary, provide specific guidance to children to pro-

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mote positive relationships in the classroom. Key strategies to keep in mind include:

• **Establish rules for the classroom.** Decide on your most important rules and share them with the children. For example: "It's not okay to say, 'You can't play.'" (See **You Can't Say You Can't Play** by Vivian Gussin Paley, under references.)

• **Address misconceptions and hurtful statements immediately.** If children mock or make fun of a child with a special need, teachers cannot ignore the situation. "Josie isn't making those noises to annoy you. People who can't hear make unusual noises sometimes. We can all learn to talk with Josie by signing words with our hands."

• **Hold discussions on the topic of making friends.** Circle time is ideal for discussing a topic related to making and keeping friends. A picture book on the topic is a good way to introduce the subject.

• **Pair children to work on a task.** Partnering or pairing is one way to give children opportunities to work with peers they wouldn't normally seek out. Having a child work with a differently abled peer to complete a task can make both children feel competent.

• **Interpret children's actions.** Children sometimes are not conscious of what they are doing to alienate their peers. By verbalizing what is happening, you can help them become aware and then change their behavior. "Bobbie pulled on the book because he wanted to look at it with you. He didn't mean to take it away. He wants to be friendly." "Bobbie, if you sit next to Jose and tell him what you want, he may be happy to look at the book with you."

Enhancing Children's Independence

All young children have a strong drive to establish a sense of independence. Children who may be dependent on others for many of the basic functions of life have a particular need to do as much as possible for themselves.

Selecting an activity is one way in which children demonstrate their independence. Limiting the number of choices in the beginning is especially critical for children who may be overwhelmed by too many choices. Teachers can gradually add new choices when they feel the children can handle them. Remember that children have individual learning styles and will approach activities in their own ways. Some will want to watch what other children are doing before they make their own choices. Others will need assistance and encouragement to move into an interest area or join a small group.

Traffic patterns must be considered carefully, especially if there are children with physical disabilities in the classroom. Make an assessment of each interest area to ensure that children can move in and out easily and have access to the shelves.

When everything in the classroom has a place, children can see what options are available, select the materials they need, and return them to the appropriate place. Materials should be organized on low shelves in the areas in which they will be used — blocks and props in the block area, art materials on the art shelf, and so on. Picture labels show that everything has a place and indicate where materials should be returned. It may be helpful to also use tactile labels (e.g., taping a pattern block piece on the shelf where the pattern blocks go), if there are children with visual disabilities in the classroom.

Helping Children Stay Involved in Their Work

Young children are easily distracted by activities and noise in the room. Some children may find it particularly difficult to sustain their involvement in an activity. Both classroom arrangement and choice of materials can be used to promote sustained involvement.

To minimize distractions, organize the classroom so that shelves and furniture used to define interest areas block the children's view of other areas. For example, move the sand and water table against a wall so children engaged in play will have their backs to potential distractions.

Children are more likely to sustain their play if the materials offer lots of options for exploration and investigation. Materials like play dough or water are especially appealing. Adding different kinds of props and utensils increases the complexity of the activity and extends the opportunities for children to remain involved.

Adaptations or the addition of new materials can promote children's involvement in activities while

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minimizing frustrations. For example, puzzles with knobs on the pieces make it easier for children to grasp, magnetic toys can help a child with limited small muscle control, inserting a rubber ball on the paint brush handles and markers will make it easier for a child to grasp and control them, taping a piece of paper to the table will make the paper more stable, and placing drawing paper or pieces of a game on a cafeteria tray may help a child with a visual impairment stay focused on the activity.

Children with special needs, like all children, thrive in an environment that supports their independence and encourages them to pursue their own interests. When adults create an atmosphere of acceptance and are responsive to what children say and do, competence and self-esteem grow. Including children with differing abilities in the classroom allows teachers to enrich the curriculum by promoting acceptance and greater understanding of others. What is now required by law has far ranging benefits for everyone involved.

References

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Strategies for Successfully Including Children with Differing Abilities

Language delay

Expand on what child says; talk about what you are doing; model the correct usage and pronunciation instead of correcting.
Provide frequent visual or concrete reinforcement.
Keep directions simple; encourage child to repeat them for reinforcement.
Explain new concepts or vocabulary.

Attention problems

Start with short group sessions and activities.
Provide visual clues (e.g., define floor space with tape).
Offer a limited number of choices.
Provide positive reinforcement for sustained attention.
Help child quiet down after vigorous play.
Plan for transition times, including arrival and departure.

Developmental delays and learning disabilities

Allow for extra demonstrations and practice sessions.
Keep all directions simple, sequenced, and organized.
Offer extra help in developing fine and gross motor skills, if needed.

Emotional/social problems

Provide extra structure by limiting toys and defining physical space for activities.
Allow shy child to observe group activities until ready to participate.
Help aggressive child control behavior through consistent enforcement of rules.
Observe dramatic play for important clues about feelings and concerns.
Help child learn how to express feelings in appropriate ways.

Mental retardation

Establish realistic goals for each child.
Provide frequent positive feedback.
Sequence learning activities into small steps.
Allow adequate time for performance and learning.
Encourage cooperative play and help the child move from independent to parallel to group interaction.

Impaired hearing

Obtain child's attention when speaking; seat child close to voice or music.
Repeat, rephrase as needed; alert other children to use same technique.
Learn some sign language and teach signing to the entire class.
Provide visual clues (e.g., pictures or . . — . . — to represent rhythm).
Demonstrate new activities or tasks.

Impaired vision

Ensure child's safety at all times without being overprotective.
Provide verbal clues for activities.
Introduce child to equipment and space verbally and through touch.
Use a "buddy" system.

Physical disability or poor coordination

Accessibility

Organize physical space to accommodate child in wheelchair.
Use tables that accommodate wheelchairs or provide trays on wheelchairs.
Use bolsters or other supports for floor activities.
Provide adaptive equipment for standing.
Learn about the availability of assistive technology and devices.

Manual dexterity

Use magnetic toys to facilitate small muscle activities.
Attach bells to wrist or ankles for musical activities.
Use adaptive scissors or spoons as needed.

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