

A Place for Marie: Guidelines for the Integration Process

by Gail Solit

Marie, who is four years old, is deaf. Her parents, who are also deaf, have used American Sign Language with Marie since her birth. Marie is bright, friendly, likes to converse, and is sometimes bossy — a pretty typical four year old. She attends a preschool for deaf children three days a week. Her parents and teachers feel she will benefit from attending a nearby child care center on the other two days of the week. Her working parents also need child care before and after school when the preschool for deaf children is not open.

Today more and more children with disabilities are entering child care settings. Though teachers may need a somewhat different orientation and new skills to work with children with a wider range of abilities, sound early childhood practices and teaching principles provide an effective foundation. To maximize the effectiveness of their work with these children and their families, teachers and directors need to work together to address the following topics.

Center Philosophy

Most high quality early childhood programs have developed a philosophy statement that speaks to the importance of providing a good program for all children and parents. Yet sometimes “all children” means all nondisabled children. It is a very important process for staff, parents, and other professionals to review and, where necessary, expand the center’s philosophical statement to ensure that it is inclusive for all children.

It is important for everyone involved to examine their feelings about working with children and adults who

have disabilities and to explore how they feel about working with other professionals to provide appropriate services for all children and their parents. A strong explicit written philosophy statement will serve as a guide for parents and staff.

Staff Training

Marie’s new teacher needs to learn about deafness. She doesn’t need to become an expert; but she needs to know enough to understand evaluation data, to explain deafness to other parents and children, and to plan an appropriate educational program for Marie.

This teacher’s situation is similar to that of a teacher who is new to teaching two year olds and must now learn about them — or a teacher who will be working with a child from a culture that she knows little about. Most early childhood educators expect to continually learn about children and families. As a program begins to include children with differing abilities, all staff must make a commitment to learn about each child from a variety of sources.

- **Listening to parents**

Since Marie’s parents are also deaf, they know what this disability means for Marie. They can provide her teacher with a wealth of clinical information and terminology, and they can explain what life is like for a child who is deaf.

Parents of children who have differing abilities have listened to many, many specialists talk about their child. They have received training on how to position or hold their child who has cerebral palsy; they

Beginnings

Beginnings

know how to use an inhaler to help a child with asthma. Most parents are eager to pass on their knowledge so the teacher can do a better job caring for their child.

- **Access to specialists**

Teachers should have access to all the specialists who work with a child after that child is enrolled in their classroom. Specialists provide both theoretical and practical information about the child and about the ability.

- **Focused in-service training**

Directors can design training opportunities to provide teachers with the information they need. Important topics include: understanding federal laws about children with differing abilities, the benefits of early intervention and inclusion, working with families, encouraging positive social interactions between children, team building, and assessment procedures. Local colleges, universities, or early childhood training institutes can be accessed by staff to acquire information on these and other relevant topics. Many books and videotapes on these topics are available through early childhood and special education presses.

Now that the teacher knows basic information about Marie, she is ready to work with her. The teacher learns that Marie has a moderate hearing loss, with no developmental or cognitive delays. Marie wears hearing aids. The audiologist taught the teacher how to check the hearing aid to ensure it is working. The teacher learns that the hearing aid will make sounds louder, but it will not necessarily clarify speech. The parents explain that Marie uses American Sign Language to communicate. The director decides to find a volunteer who can sign to Marie, communicate with the teacher, and also be a role model for Marie. The teacher also receives release time to attend sign language classes.

The audiologist explains how to adapt the classroom environment so there are less auditory distractions for Marie. The teacher learns that many aspects of the program do not need to change because Marie will benefit from the high quality early childhood classroom that is already in place.

Federal Laws

An essential area of training for early childhood teachers is information about the federal laws mandated for children with disabilities and their parents.

Teachers who work in early childhood programs need to know what is expected of them.

Public Law 101-476, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) which passed Congress in 1990, shapes what educators and parents can expect and demand for their children who are differently abled. Part H (the Infants and Toddlers Program) of IDEA is a grant program to assist states in developing early intervention programs for infants and toddlers with disabilities in settings which are as similar as possible to programs that serve infants and toddlers without disabilities. Part B of IDEA states that to the extent possible children with disabilities should receive their special education services in regular education settings, often referred to as the least restrictive environment (LRE).

Information regarding federal legislation is available through the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), United States Department of Education, 400 Maryland Avenue SW, Washington, DC 20202 — (202) 205-9084; the National Early Childhood Technical Assistance System (NEC*TAS), 500 Nations Bank Plaza, 137 East Franklin Street, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514 — (919) 962-2001; and the lead agencies which provide special education services for children in each state.

Team Development

Many early childhood educators already see themselves as part of a team: center team, classroom team, and teacher and parent team. In many high quality early childhood programs, teachers meet regularly to divide center tasks, to plan activities to meet curriculum goals, and to discuss progress and growth of children with each other and with parents.

Children with disabilities are guaranteed a service coordinator by law. The center providing care becomes one of the sites which the service coordinator manages for children and their families. All professionals, including child care teachers, who work with the child, together with the child's parents, become members of this multidisciplinary team. This team meets regularly to develop and implement the best Individual Educational Program (IEP) for the child and his/her family or an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP).

Working within a multidisciplinary team may be a new skill for some teachers. Some teamwork training

may be required to help teachers learn to communicate across abilities and to share responsibilities in regard to children and their families.

Marie's child care teacher attends all meetings about Marie's educational plans, together with Marie's parents, the audiologist, the sign language trainer, and the teachers from the preschool serving children who are deaf. During the meetings everyone adds their observations and assessments about Marie's progress. The plan for Marie states that an adult who signs needs to be in the child care class with Marie, that the audiologist visits the child care center monthly, and that the sign language trainer visits the classroom every two weeks. Through these meetings and other less formal conversations, everyone is working to create the best program possible for Marie.

Physical Environment and Staffing Patterns

Each classroom environment must be designed to meet the needs of the age of the children served, and it must reflect the cultures of these children. When a child who has a disability enters the classroom, the teacher needs to be ready to once again change the environment. Sometimes the changes required are physical (special chairs, standing tables) and sometimes they require staff adjustments. For a more thorough discussion about adapting environments, read the article by Diane Trister Dodge, "Places for ALL Children: Building Environments for Differing Needs."

Marie's teacher learns that for Marie's needs only a few physical environmental changes are required. Marie will function best in an environment which is visual and has many hands-on materials and activities; this classroom, already visual and highly interactive, meets the needs of all the children.

Marie's teacher learns if she wants to get everyone's attention, calling from one end of the classroom is no longer a fair or effective method because Marie will miss the message. Instead she needs to walk over to Marie, tap her on the shoulder, get her attention, and then make her announcement.

In most special education classes, the ratio of staff to children is small to allow for more individual attention. Adding staff to facilitate inclusion is often a financial issue which requires administrative attention. But there are several other methods of solving staff needs which do not require money.

One method, depending on the child's particular abilities and needs, is the utilization of volunteers, such as the Foster Grandparent Program or student interns. The director can contact local volunteer organizations or college or university programs to organize a group of assistants.

A second method to help with staffing is to bring other members of the child's interdisciplinary team into the classroom. Often, the other professional or parent can be present in the classroom during the intervention activity. Individual attention can be provided to one child with other children watching or participating — a benefit to all.

When the audiologist and the sign language trainer come to Marie's classroom they play two games with a small group of children. While they play Twister, all the children in the group, including Marie, learn the signs for red, yellow, blue, green, your turn, right, and left. During a role playing game the children have to express various feelings through body language, an important part of American Sign Language.

A third method to create more individual time between teacher and children is to redesign specific daily routines. During circle or meeting time, most early childhood programs read a story, discuss the day's events, or review the calendar and weather with a large group of children. A simple solution for providing more individual attention to a child with a disability within a large group is to have two concurrent meeting times instead of one.

Individual Needs

Most early childhood educators subscribe to the importance of a developmentally appropriate program for young children. Developmentally appropriate includes two concepts: age appropriateness and individual appropriateness.

All of the above adaptations and additions to Marie's class and program relate to making the program meet her individual needs. These individual needs include Marie's learning style (visual and interactive), accounting for Marie's family background (the wishes of Marie's parents), and individual personality (Marie is friendly, likes to converse, and is at times bossy).

Through her knowledge of typical development, her new knowledge about deafness, and her insights about Marie, Marie's teacher can now plan appropriate activities. For

Beginnings

Beginnings

Marie, who is basically developing as a typical four year old, only a few changes are needed in the curriculum. As long as everything is presented to her in American Sign Language, all good early childhood activities should be appropriate for her. Her teacher will formulate ideas of how best to alter the curriculum through the discussions with the specialists and parents at the IEP or IFSP meeting.

Information and Support

One of the adjustments teachers may need to make is how they talk to children about children with differing abilities. Because of the work of educators like Louise Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force, many early childhood teachers are already skilled in appropriate ways to help children accept and respect each other. Teachers need to be ready to answer questions about the child with a disability — knowledgeably and honestly.

When children asked, “Why does Marie speak funny?” the teacher answered, “Marie’s speech sounds different than yours because Marie has never heard speech. Her sounds are hers; each of us has a different sounding voice. Marie does not rely on her speech to communicate but instead uses her hands. She uses American Sign Language. All of us will be learning sign language so we can better communicate with Marie and she can communicate with us. There is nothing wrong with Marie because her speech sounds different, and you do not need to be afraid of her.”

Another adjustment teachers may need to make is to actively encourage social interactions between disabled and nondisabled children. Teachers may want to design some carefully planned learning activities to encourage sharing, cooperation, and interaction until all the children are comfortable with each other. Activities which pair children to complete tasks or games which include small groups of children are good ways to develop trust and tolerance between children. Once children are comfortable with each other, they will begin to see that they have much in common.

The idea of inclusion is being implemented throughout our society. Through legislation like the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and because of societal attitudinal changes, more and more people who are disabled are included in settings where they were not included before. Many parents want their children to be able to interact with all kinds of

people, without fear and intolerance. They want to have their children in programs that are reflective of the larger community.

Some parents may need additional information about specific disabilities to help them feel comfortable with the idea of inclusion. They may worry that including a child with a particular need will mean that their child will receive less attention. Some parents will worry that their child will copy behaviors of the child with special needs. And some parents will worry that if a child who has a medical condition is included in their child’s program, their child may not remain healthy.

All of these are serious concerns that need to be discussed. Teachers need to understand and share the commitment to the center’s philosophy and policies regarding integration so that they can explain and share these beliefs. Teachers need to interact in a partnership with parents, listen empathetically, and develop a mutual investment with each parent and child.

In Marie’s class some of the hearing four year olds went home and “turned off their voices.” They tried to communicate with their parents by using the few signs that they knew and by inventing other signs. Some parents were concerned that having a deaf child in the class would slow down their child’s verbal language development. Knowing that four year olds learn about concepts through play and role playing, Marie’s teacher explained that the hearing children were trying out a role, just as they might try on the role of Mommy or a fire fighter. The teacher explained that the four year olds would not continue to keep their voices off for long because it would not be an effective method of getting what they wanted from the hearing adults, who did not sign in their home. The teacher also suggested that the parents capitalize on their child’s interest in learning another language. The teacher recommended children’s sign language books and video tapes that the parents could purchase or borrow from the library so that they all could learn American Sign Language together.

Addressing these issues will help directors and staff work together and with parents to integrate children with differing abilities. Their center philosophy will reflect their commitment to working with all children. They will grow as educators as they see themselves as members of a larger team; and as they develop an adaptive environment, new staffing patterns, and a curricula which meets the individual

○ needs of each child; and as they learn to communicate effectively and empathetically with all children and parents.

References

Bredenkamp, S. (editor). **Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Programs Serving Children Birth Through Age 8, Expanded Edition.** Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1987.

Bruder, M. B. **Early Childhood Community Integration: An Option for Preschool Special Education.** Washington, DC: Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Winter 1993.

Cook, R., A. Tessier, and V. Armbruster. **Adapting Early Childhood Curricula for Children with Special Needs.** Columbus, OH: Merrill Publishing Co., 1987.

○ Derman-Sparks, L., and the ABC Task Force. **Anti-bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children.** Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1989.

Dodge, D., and L. Colker. **The Creative Curriculum for Early Childhood, Third Edition.** Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies, Inc., 1992.

Solit, G., M. Taylor, and A. Bednarczyk. **Access for All: Integrating Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Hearing Preschoolers.** Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Pre-College Programs, 1992.

*Gail Solit, MA, is the director of the Gallaudet University Child Development Center and is one of the co-authors of **Access for All: Integrating Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Hearing Preschoolers**, a videotape and manual, available through the Gallaudet Bookstore, (202) 651-5380, for \$17.95 plus \$3 shipping and handling.*

○