Including Young Children with Special Needs

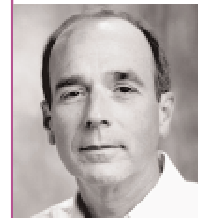
by Ilene S. Schwartz, Samuel L. Odom, and Susan R. Sandall

Jimmy is a four-year-old child with autism. When his parents went to their local public school system to seek help for Jimmy, they said that they hoped he could attend the child care program in their community that his sister attended. Through the cooperation of the child care director and teacher, Jimmy was enrolled. An itinerant early childhood special education teacher from the school system visited every week to work with the classroom teacher on planning activities, routines, and guidelines that would meet Jimmy's special needs. During the first months, an assistant teacher (paid for by the school system) came to the classroom for a few hours a day to assist Jimmy when he needed a little extra help, and also help out with other children in the class.

The first few months were not easy for Jimmy or his teachers. Jimmy would have tantrums, take his shoes and socks off, move aimlessly from one activity to another. With the support of the child care director and Jimmy's parents, planning and consultation between the special education itinerant teacher and the classroom teacher at the child care center, and the hands-on work of the assistant teacher, Jimmy learned to participate in all activities in the classroom. By the end of the year, he had learned to follow the routines of the classroom with only a little assistance from the teacher. He independently participated in classroom activities, and made progress in his educational program. The parents reported that they were pleased with Jimmy's progress and participation in the program.

For the past five years, investigators with the Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion (ECRII) have studied the inclusion of children with special needs, like Jimmy, in early childhood programs. The goals of the ECRII are to identify what facilitates and what presents barriers to inclusion of young children with disabilities in early childhood programs and to develop ways of supporting inclusion in classroom and community settings (Odom, Peck, Hanson, Beckman, Kaiser, Lieber, Brown, Horn, & Schwartz, 1996).

Across the five years of this project, we have talked with hundreds of early childhood program providers, parents, and directors, and spent thousands of hours in early childhood settings. From this work, which encompasses many research studies, we have developed the following eight synthesis points to share what we have learned with the consumers of inclusion — teachers and directors in early childhood programs, parents, and public school personnel.



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Inclusion is about belonging and participating in a diverse society.

As we talked to families, one point became crystal clear. Inclusion is not just a school issue — it extends to the communities in which children and their families live. For Jimmy's parents, his participation in a child care center in his community was an important goal. Other parents have emphasized the importance of participation in community activities, religious activities, and family activities. These parents also remind us that inclusion is not only a disability issue; all children and families have a right to participate and be supported in schools and communities (Hanson, Wolfberg, Zercher, Morgan, Gutierrez, Barnwell, & Beckman, 1998).

Individuals — teachers, families, administrators — define inclusion differently.

Individuals in different locations sometimes have different views about what inclusion means. In some locations, inclusion was defined as children with special needs attending a Head Start program, with both a Head Start teacher and special education teacher sharing the role of lead teacher. In other programs, inclusion meant having children with and without special needs enrolled in separate classes and coming together for integrated play sessions for part of a day. In Jimmy's program, inclusion meant having children with special needs enroll in community-based child care and the itinerant teacher working collaboratively with the child care teacher to build an appropriate educational program for Jimmy. Program participants define inclusion in ways that make sense to their local setting, community, and families.

Beliefs about inclusion influence its implementation.

Families', teachers', and directors' beliefs about inclusion influence how inclusive practices are planned and carried out. Beliefs about human diversity — culture, race, language, class, ability — also influence how inclusion is carried out (Odom, Horn, Marquart, Hanson, Wolfberg, Beckman, Lieber, Li, Schwartz, Janko, Sandall, 1999). In Jimmy's program, his teacher and the director of the center believed that Jimmy should be accepted into the center because he was a member of their community. These beliefs fit very well with the parents'.

In other programs we have observed, teachers' beliefs about the types of classes or activities that provide for inclusive experiences for young children with disabilities have clashed. What is important in planning for inclusion is to be explicit in discussing beliefs that all participants hold. The purpose is not to achieve agreement but to come to a place of understanding and mutual respect that forms a necessary foundation for building inclusive programs (Lieber, Capell, Sandall, Wolfberg, Horn, & Beckman, 1998).

Programs, not children, have to be "ready for inclusion."

In our research, we found that the most successful inclusive programs view inclusion as the starting point for all children. Children with disabilities are not expected to "earn" their way into early childhood programs by having the necessary "entry" skills (e.g., toilet training, communicating in sentences). Programs may need to make special accommodations to make the inclusive experience successful. Jimmy lacked many of the skills that were typical of his four-year-old classmates; but the classroom teacher, itinerant teacher, and assistant teacher, with the help of the other classmates, arranged activities in ways that encouraged and even required Jimmy to participate. This view of inclusion is based on the belief that inclusion can be appropriate for all children; making it work successfully depends on planning, training, and support.

Collaboration is the cornerstone to effective inclusive programs.

One of the clearest findings from our research is that collaboration among adults (e.g., early childhood teachers, special education teachers, parents) is a "make or break" issue. Successful programs have teachers that communicate with one another, hold similar philosophies of early childhood education or have respect for different philosophies, and plan together. Col-laboration among adults, from different disciplines and often with different philosophies, is one of the greatest challenges to successful inclusion (Lieber, Beckman, Hanson, Janko, Marquart, Horn, & Odom, 1997). In Jimmy's program, the early childhood teacher met weekly with the itinerant teacher to discuss Jimmy's program and plan activities, while the assistant teacher helped out in the classroom on a daily basis, working with Jimmy and other children in the classroom.

Specialized instruction is an important component of inclusion.

Participating in community-based early childhood programs is necessary but not always sufficient for implementing full inclusion. Full inclusion requires that specialized instruction and support be provided as necessary to meet the

Synthesis Points

1. Inclusion is about belonging and participating in a diverse society.
2. Individuals — teachers, families, administrators — define inclusion differently.
3. Beliefs about inclusion influence its implementation.
4. Programs, not children, have to be "ready for inclusion."
5. Collaboration is the cornerstone to effective inclusive programs.
6. Specialized instruction is an important component of inclusion.
7. Adequate support is necessary to make inclusive environments work.
8. Inclusion can benefit children with and without disabilities.

special needs of children with disabilities (Schwartz, Billingsley, & McBride, 1998). Sometimes that means providing extra help for a skill that many children may be learning (e.g., putting on a coat), and sometimes it means providing direct teaching of skills that typically developing children seem to learn naturally (e.g., making transitions in the classroom).

Specialized instruction can be delivered through a variety of effective strategies, many of which can be embedded in ongoing classroom activities. For Jimmy, the itinerant teacher planned activities with the early childhood teacher that would occur every day. For example, to address Jimmy's goal of putting on his coat, he was given assistance (by an adult or peer) before going outside to play or leaving to go home. The teacher gave Jimmy the least assistance necessary for him to be successful on the task, which led to his independently getting dressed during these transition times.

To address another one of the objectives on Jimmy's individualized education program, the educational team (the classroom teacher, the special educa-tion itinerant, the assistant teacher, and Jimmy's parents) decided to introduce a picture schedule to help Jimmy be more independent during transitions. The team met together to plan the strategy, the itinerant teacher made the necessary materials, the classroom teacher implemented it on a daily basis, and the itinerant teacher monitored the intervention weekly by observing it in the classroom and talking to the child care staff. By the end of the school year, Jimmy was using his picture schedule independently and his parents were using a similar program at home.

Adequate support is necessary to make inclusive environments work.

Support includes training, personnel, materials, planning time, and ongoing consultation. It can be delivered in different ways, and each person involved in inclusion may have unique needs. In Jimmy's program, the child care director provided administrative support, in terms of encouragement and approval, to Jimmy's teacher during the early stressful periods after he was enrolled. The itinerant teacher provided support for the classroom teacher through regular weekly meetings, offering advice, and demonstrating ways to work with Jimmy in the classroom. The assistant teacher helped directly in the classroom during the busiest times of the days, either directly with Jimmy or by taking on activities that would free the classroom teacher to work with him.

Inclusion can benefit children with and without disabilities.

In inclusive programs, children with special needs learn skills that help them become successful and independent. Parents of typically developing children often report beneficial changes in their children's confidence, self-esteem, and understanding of diversity. High quality early childhood practices form the necessary foundation for high quality inclusive programs, thus all children benefit. In his early childhood program, Jimmy learned to follow the routines of the classroom and became more independent (of teacher assistance) across the year. Peers learned ways to help Jimmy to become successful in the classroom activities.

Child care directors and staff have a critical impact on the successful participation of children with special needs in early childhood programs. Directors support the inclusion process by arranging for training when necessary, providing staff time to meet with other professionals, and encouraging staff who are making a strong effort in supporting children with special needs in their classroom. Child care teachers support inclusion by recognizing the adaptations that may need to be made in some activities for children with special needs, collaborating with special support personnel in planning activities for children with special needs, and communicating with parents. Through joint efforts of early childhood and specialized support professions, inclusive early child care classes can be places where children with special needs and typically developing children grow, develop, and flourish.

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