

Insights From a Parent

Why Inclusion Benefits Everyone

by Terrell Walton

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While the thought of including children with special needs may seem daunting to some providers of early education, the center my daughter attends embraces inclusion as the norm. For this, I am ever grateful.

My Search

I was stunned when my second child was born with a cleft lip and alveolus. The first year of her life was a series of surgeries, constant medical care, doctor visits, and feeding dilemmas. On the anniversary of her first major surgery, I was told that on top of the medical issues (more surgeries, more recovery time), the physical differences and resulting emotional trauma, she would need speech therapy.

I had thought my life was getting back to normal and was looking forward to time alone with my work. Instead, Gabrielle would need more of my attention, more of my time, and more of my energy.

Already overwhelmed by the constant drama of family life, I began an extensive search. After a number of disappointments I found The Early Learning Center at Winston Prouty.

A Haven for Gabrielle

"This isn't just a day care center," a firm voice warned me during an initial call. "We have an actual curriculum. We're an inclusive early learning center."

As I stand inside the doorway watching Gabrielle playing with her friends, Ben and Daniel, I realize how fortunate we are. There are posters donning the walls of this room, clearly put there as reminders for the parents, touting that

90% of a child's brain has been mapped by age five. Seventy-five percent of this is achieved in the first three years. With such a critical time frame for development, it is clearly in every child's best interest to immerse him or her in a richly textured and stimulating environment.

Here is a place that will not only care for Gabrielle's special needs, but also treat her like one of the group. Whatever the current focus of her special therapy may be, it becomes part of the entire group's language focus. Her presence spurs varied and intensive approaches to speech development that benefits all of the children. In turn, the other children are role models and sup-

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portive peers for her. It is a mutually beneficial relationship that nurtures the children's inherent compassion, speaks to their natural curiosity, and promotes a healthy understanding of friendship.

Gabrielle's teacher, Susan Heimer, is avid about the inclusion of children with special needs. "They are all children first," she softly reminds me when I falter in my wording. This is the theme that makes the Early Learning Center (ELC) such a resounding success.

"All of the children (here) are special and unique," she says adamantly. "You should see them all as individuals. Not because they have special needs, but because they are all people."

For Gabrielle, the benefits have been obvious from the start. I can readily see the changes in her self-confidence, her increased desire to risk new interactions, and her readiness to try new words and sounds. She has been immersed in a stimulating world of wonderful, supportive, and compassionate peers and teachers. Together they play in the sandbox, blow bubbles, sing about five little monkeys, bang on drums, and read stories. She is never treated differently or separated from the group. Gabrielle is one of them: a child.

Making Inclusion Possible

To achieve this wondrous setting, no tremendous changes were initiated. While it is true that the teachers and administrators recently spent over a year working on a revised curriculum, its main platform was meant to encourage increased learning in a caring environment for all of the children. The inclusion of diverse techniques to support special needs meant increased variety and stimulation. Here an appointed provider is kept updated on each child's special needs by the thera-

pist or early interventionist. At staff meetings the individual goals are assessed and a properly inclusive weekly agenda is created.

"We try to implement activities to meet the special needs children — small language groups, fine motor skills, large motor activities — but also assist all of the children's development," explains ELC Level 2 teacher, Deb Clemente. Perhaps they will choose to focus on the "D" sound by picking appropriate songs, books, and activities or choose to include more specific movement activities. These choices are influenced, but not overshadowed, by a special need.

As a rule, children with special needs are never singled out. Differences are not focused upon as hindrances. Instead, they are embraced as teachers of compassion and understanding for those without special needs.

While behavioral problems are admittedly more challenging, most of the special needs are easily integrated. There are no "One-on-Ones," only "Integration Assistants" when a greater ratio of teacher to child is needed. In sync with the program's aim of inclusion, these additional providers work with all of the children by including them in any therapy or activity.

"We had a child with cerebral palsy who had to do special stretches. So, we all did them and it was great," Susan recalls with a terrific smile. All of the children improved their body tone and motor skills.

There was a little girl in this classroom with a hearing impairment. Consequently, signing became an additional communication skill that many of the children quickly picked up. I know that Gabrielle frequently uses basic signs that she learned from her early intervention groups. This skill alone quickly diffused her frustration in not being able to com-

municate easily. Signing is yet another useful communication skill from which any toddler can benefit.

To accommodate a child with severely impaired vision, additional sensory tools were brought into the classroom. Susan illustrated this by holding up an empty seasoning shaker from their kitchen set for me to smell. The potent odors made my nose twitch. That's sensory stimulation.

For Gabrielle, speech development is the crucial element in her specialized therapy plan. As these children are in the midst of championing speech, all of them profit from the increased exercises and supporting activities.

The focus here is on music as a teaching tool in language development. Singing is a wonderful way to plant these sounds in their memory and cue their use more readily. Repetition creates familiarity, encourages proper enunciation and, best of all, is fun for the children.

Transition songs are used to ease the children into the next activity. Start humming a song and they clean up or head to the sink to wash their hands. Guest musicians add vitality and magic to this underlying theme. Music is enjoyed through the vehicles of dance, instrument play, and group singing that bind the children together as a group. For the little girl who could not hear the songs, the teachers enhanced their hand movements, bringing in yet another dimension.

Integration, not separation, nourishes each child.

Bringing It All Together

Peers as models are necessary for this program to succeed. Gabrielle looks to her friends for proper usage and

imitates their efforts. Beyond the specific curriculum choices that have been so carefully implemented, the presence of these model children is of the greatest benefit to those with special needs. Peers naturally become involved and make therapies a class activity. Personally, I would not have entertained sending her to a school without this blend of children.

Parents as partners are also an integral support for the providers. If there is a technique that works at home, parents are encouraged to share this information. Teachers readily integrate any positive suggestions. An intricate connective web is created between child, parent, teacher, and health professional which educates and benefits everyone involved.

Clearly this educational program benefits Gabrielle and others like her, but what attracts the peer models to such a program?

Those parents concerned with stimulating their children's social and emotional development find the inclusive program especially inviting. Beyond the obvious benefit of an accredited curriculum-based educational center, the compassionate introduction to others' differences is an attractive highlight.

Daniel, whose parents both work full time, has needed care since the age of four months. He entered into the Early Learning Center at a year and a half. "The other place was just a day care," explains his mother, Susan MacMahon.

She finds great comfort in the expanded program. When Daniel first began at ELC, he was dragging his foot. Because of the other children's close interaction

with physical therapists, they were able to diagnose his problem. "It was nothing and worked itself out. But it was a great relief to know they were aware." "A friend of mine was nervous about having her child around kids with special needs. She thought her child wouldn't get enough attention (the children of special needs would get it). But she ended up loving it," she says. "I feel Daniel gets more attention because of inclusion — more variety, more activities, more caring adults."

She is particularly impressed by Daniel's participation in therapy group activities that reinforce his own growth. "I feel his loving nature is very helpful to the others. He used to always hug (another child, who has moved to the next age classroom), when she was being difficult, and it calmed her right down." It's not hard to hear the pride in Susan's voice.

"It's really good for Daniel to understand about different kids and their needs. This will help him to be a compassionate adult."

Penny Kaufman, mother of Ben, experienced a variety of programs before coming to the ELC. Having learned from a sour experience with her older daughter's day care, she and her husband were more thoughtful when it came to their second child. After their home-based provider suddenly closed her doors, they rushed to find a reliable, high-quality, and stimulating day care.

Asking other parents for suggestions unleashed a plethora of enthusiastic plugs for this well-established program. What they found was an early learning center with a rich and varied curriculum, and a dedicated, well-trained staff.

Using her husband's special education background as a guide, Penny found herself agreeing that this was the right choice for Ben.

They had been wondering if his speech was being delayed. "They tell me he is just being stubborn," she says, relief resonating in her tone. She also finds it a great comfort that these teachers are accustomed to detecting problems in the early years of a child's life.

Penny chose to keep Ben at the school because of its uniqueness and its well thought out, structured program. As a concerned parent, she highly values the promotion of acceptance and compassion within the program. Through adapting to other's differences they learn to see beyond the disability to the child.

When I asked teacher Deb Clemente what the most obvious benefits of inclusion were for her, she said, "Awareness. As a child I had little exposure to children with handicaps and (was) often unsure how to behave around handicapped adults. Integration at a young age allows all children to become comfortable."

Children naturally seek understanding. If given the chance to interact, they will move quickly beyond perceived differences and engage other children in play. Awareness promotes understanding and leads naturally into compassion and acceptance. This acceptance allows enriching, varied experiences to flourish within the stimulating setting of inclusive early learning. This is the wheel that turns when inclusion fires the engine.

Gabrielle wins. And so does everyone else.