

Parent Primer: Placing Special Needs Children in the Inclusive Class

by Nicole Eredics



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The Team Approach

This past week I went to my son's Back to School Night and despite the tired, musty, out-of-date classrooms, I found his teachers to be quite the opposite! They were enthusiastic about their jobs; they use current technology to teach students and repeatedly encouraged parents to stay in touch. In the end, their message was very clear — teachers, students and parents must work together to ensure the student's educational success.

I noted that this "team" approach towards education not only works in the regular education setting, but in special education as well. While teachers and schools are becoming more skilled at collaborating to provide positive educational experiences for special needs children, parents also need to become actively involved in the education process. In particular, parents should participate in the decisions and classroom placements of their child. Together, the team can work towards finding an optimal learning environment for the student.

What is the Best Placement for My Child?

In the United States, there are a variety of settings in which Special Education can be delivered. In general, students with special needs can be placed in self-contained classes, they can be mainstreamed, or included in the regular education classroom. An inclusive placement is considered by special education experts to be the ideal situation for most children with special needs.

A "full inclusion" classroom is a setting where students with special needs are educated alongside students without special needs, while maintaining appropriate supports and services. Special education in inclusive classrooms is considered a service, not a place. Services are integrated into the daily routines and classroom structure. Curriculum and strategies are brought to the student, instead of relocating the student to another room in the school in order to receive service. Special needs students in an inclusive classroom are placed with their chronological age-mates, regardless of whether or not the students are working at the same level as each other.

Why Inclusion?

As a full inclusion teacher for many years, I have had the opportunity to see first-hand how inclusive classrooms provide numerous social, emotional and intellectual benefits for children with special needs. In addition, studies have shown that there are also many benefits for regular education students. Not only are there increased learning opportunities but the inclusive classroom is also designed to meet the educational needs of ALL learners.

Below are some of the many ways in which an inclusive classroom can benefit not only students but schools and communities as well:

Social – All children in the class are fully active, participating members regardless of their ability level. There are increased social interactions and relationships between students, staff and families. A greater understanding of diversity develops, in addition to improved communication skills as students learn and respond to one another's differences. These repeated interactions promote inclusive behavior in future situations.

Emotional – Students and families begin to feel more integrated into the school community and a greater sense of belonging develops. The self-confidence and self-esteem of special needs students grows naturally from the positive support of peers and teachers.

Intellectual – All students have equal access to the curriculum despite academic ability. Accommodations and modifications are made to the curriculum to meet the student's needs. Students become more actively engaged in learning and become more confident learners as they experience greater success in school.

Is Your Child's School Inclusive?

A full inclusion classroom works best when teachers and staff are trained and supported in inclusive practice. Parents should arrange to speak with the principal, meet the teacher and tour the school prior to their child's placement in order to determine the level of inclusion of special needs children in school life. Parents can:

Walk Around the School – Is student work displayed and celebrated? Are all children able to access the library, gymnasium, lunchroom and computer room? Where will your child go for support services if required?

Visit Classroom – Are desks, materials, books, and learning manipulatives arranged to facilitate cooperation, group learning and student movement around the class?

Look at Playground –What options are there for physically disabled children to use the playground? Is the playground easy to access?

Talk to Classroom Teacher – Find out where your child will sit, how your child will be included in class routines and activities, and how much support the child have from a paraprofessional.

Stay Involved!

Inclusive classrooms are places where all students can learn and thrive. The decision to place a special needs child in an inclusive class is best made between parents, teachers and the school. Parents can support this process by educating themselves on the social, emotional and intellectual benefits of inclusive education. However, parents should stay involved with their child's education throughout the school year (through communication with teacher, volunteer work, and/or attendance at school events) to help ensure that their child is continuing to receive the best education possible.