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Preschool Inclusion: Getting it Right!

There is much research documenting the benefits of inclusion for children with and without disabilities. Certain aspects of the preschool years lend themselves to inclusion. These include the following: less academic pressure than elementary school, curriculum flexibility, plenty of opportunities for play, and an emphasis on social/emotional development. Sowing the seeds of an inclusive society starts early. Modeling acceptance and diversity during early childhood helps raise compassionate citizens and can break down stereotypes and stigma associated with disabilities.

There are specific reasons why parents may choose to have their child diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in a typical preschool. These include the following: 1) Exposure to good language and behavior models. 2) Participation in stimulating activities and 3) The opportunity to develop friendships and improve social capacities. It is important to note that the lack of social relatedness is the core deficit in autism and is arguably the most debilitating symptom, especially as children move on in their lives. Since the complexity of the social milieu increases exponentially through the elementary school years and beyond, if individuals are compromised in this area, they may face a future of isolation and loneliness. As negative social experiences build up, self-esteem can deteriorate, and depression may emerge.

In segregated autism classrooms, all the kids have similar social challenges. When one does make a friendly overture to a peer, it will usually not be reciprocated. From my experience, little growth is likely to occur in the social/emotional area in these settings and rarely will friendships develop. Neurotypical children are more easily coached in how to play with the neurodivergent child because they are motivated to please the adult and they generally have the requisite social skills.

One of our main hopes for the neurodivergent child is to feel like they are part of the “community” of the class. Developmentally, it is beneficial for children this age to feel part of a group that is important to them outside their family and to be valued for who they are. In a quality preschool, each child’s talents and gifts are acknowledged and celebrated. To this end, it is crucial that the teacher and other classroom staff have a strong relationship with the neurodivergent child, as they are the leaders of the class. This is true whether or not

there is a 1:1 aid assigned to the child. Usually, the support of an outside Early Intervention Team is also required. The Team members are there to help, but we want school staff to maintain a sense of responsibility and investment in the child's progress. The school staff should be involved in all decision making affecting the child and never should the disability "experts" dictate to the school staff. A collaborative approach is best, where each team member's opinion is valued.

I once observed a child at a wonderful preschool that does a good job nurturing social/emotional development. Following a period of good behavior, the autistic child was rewarded with a few minutes of watching You Tube videos on his one-to-one aid's phone. During music class, he was very engaged in the activities. However, when the timer went off with its unique ring that all could hear, he was pulled away from the group and given the aid's phone for his reward. I was concerned that this interfered with his inclusion and opportunities for social interaction (which were the main reasons he was enrolled in this preschool). When I approached the classroom teacher with these concerns, she was so relieved that I felt this way. She said this behavior program was developed and implemented by staff from a contracted company and that she had little input. In fact, the preschool had a policy that no staff may have their cell phones with them while working. I worked with the head of school, the contracted agency and the family to change this program so that the school personnel had input and that outside support staff followed the rules that all staff abided by.

The following are strategies that will help the classroom teacher develop a strong relationship with a neurodivergent student:

- Spend one-to-one time playing/talking with the child whenever possible around their areas of interest (Floortime coaching may be needed.)
- Address the child often in group settings.
- Provide direction when needed, even if child has an aid.
- Help develop realistic expectations for the child that lead to success.
- Point out the child's strengths to the other students at every opportunity.
- Have them sit next to the teacher at circle time/story time so the teacher can reference them often.
- Provide family/home providers with the songs/games they do regularly at school so the child can practice at home.
- Let the child make choices whenever possible, so they feel some sense of control. This is important for children with sensory processing challenges because they are often overwhelmed by the processing demands in school.

- Maintain a sense of responsibility for the child's progress (with the help of the Early Intervention Team). We would not want the teacher to consistently feel that the aid "has him" so she does not have to worry about that student.

In another observation, a neurodivergent child needed a great deal of teacher correction and redirection during a 20-minute circle time. The next activity was centers. This boy picked stringing beads to make jewelry. He was amazing at it – by far the best in his group. He took great pride in his work, but sadly it was not acknowledged by any of the adults in the room. This was a missed opportunity for him to get a boost to his self-esteem, as well as for him to gain social capital with the other children. We do not want the classmates to see the neurodivergent child as the "bad" kid who is always needing correction and rarely getting praise.

When I observed Peter, he was socially awkward and mostly isolated from his peers. However, he was an expert in "Thomas the Train." In fact, he could identify the unique whistles of every train character from the show. Since we knew there were other children in the class who were also interested in Thomas, we facilitated an informal small group interaction where the kids quizzed each other on the sounds of the Thomas characters. Of course, Peter was able to answer every one correctly. His peers were quite impressed and Peter beamed with pride.

It is most important that everyone involved with the child assume that they have a rich inner world and to treat their thoughts and feelings with respect. The other students will take their cues from the adults, who have the opportunity to model how individual differences are to be viewed in the class. Children learn about themselves, to a great extent, based upon how they are treated by others early in life. By definition, kids with developmental challenges have difficulty doing much of what comes easily to others, even if they are bright and talented. Each child is different, with a unique neurobiological profile, but children on the autism spectrum often have challenges in areas such as: relating to others, communicating, feeling comfortable in one's own body, processing language, and motor planning/sequencing. It is important that adults' interpretations and responses to a child's overt behavior be understood, given these realities. Experiences of not feeling "known" are harmful to a child's developing sense of self.

A 1:1 aid, when needed, can be crucial for achieving the goals we want for the child in the typical preschool. Ideally, the aid should be enthusiastic, genuinely like young children and be prepared to be "in the mix" of kids most all the time. They should not be sitting off to the side and only intervene when there is a behavior problem. They need to not only have a good relationship with their assigned child, but with the classmates as well. Preschool children will respond positively to an engaging adult who is on the floor with them. The aid serves as the bridge between our client and the classmates. The aid should model, with every interaction,

how they view their assigned child. Is this a child that is so different from the rest of us or are their differences just part of who they are. All of us are different; for e.g., height, hair/eye color, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. In our diverse society, this is a great opportunity for kids to benefit from good modeling from the adults. Thankfully, our concept of what is “normal” is expanding greatly.

Some important roles of the aid:

- Implement a Sensory Diet ideally individualized for the child and developed by a trained Occupational Therapist. It should be proactive, not reactive (i.e., not just done when the child is in distress). Also, to provide tailored sensory input to help the child on a moment-to-moment basis. For example, provide what is calming or energizing to that child when they need it. Self-regulation is often a problem for this population.
- To resonate and amplify the child’s emotions and those of classmates that arise during the course of the day. They should look for small signs of emotional reactivity. These can include acting out or in (e.g., withdrawing, self-stimulation, an increase in rigidity). Many of the children may not easily register and/or show clear signs of feelings, especially the more nuanced ones. Since children learn about their emotions by the reflection back of those emotions by caregivers, it is highly beneficial for the aid to highlight the feelings that arise. This is vital for emotional growth and awareness, the building blocks for introspection.
- Reframe/Interpret/Explain the child’s “atypical” behavior in a positive way to classmates. For e.g., a classmate tries to engage the neurodivergent child and the latter turns away. The aid may say, “Oh they are feeling shy today.” Then they might ask the neurotypical child if they ever feel shy and what helps them feel more comfortable with others.

Here are some other examples

- Johnny flaps his arms, jumps, and makes silly sounds when he sees his classmate. The aid says, “Johnny is so happy to see you.”
 - Amir gives a hug to a classmate without asking. The aid says to the hug recipient, “Amir likes you so much!”
 - During playdoh center, Julie goes under the table and is getting stuck on touching the pieces of playdoh that have dropped on the floor. The aid says to the other children, “Julie is trying to pick up the pieces that have fallen. She wants to be sure we have enough. Isn’t that kind of her?”
- Help the child learn compromise and interpersonal conflict resolution. When a conflict arises between two peers, the aid can name the problem and have each child suggest solutions. They can discuss the merits of each proposal until a compromise is reached. This will take varying degrees of facilitation and practice. It will help the child learn

what others are thinking. This ability to read the intentions of others (Theory of Mind), is thought to be a core deficit of autistic individuals.

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- Auditory processing is difficult for many of these children, so sitting and listening for a long time may take a great deal of energy. We want to help the child experience success. For e.g., when long periods of sitting/listening are expected, such as circle or story time, the child may need to take a break when they have succeeded in sitting/listening for a period. It is best to have realistic expectations that the child is likely to meet and gradually increase the expectations as the child's capacities improve. The child will then feel that the adults understand that this is difficult for them. Perhaps after a movement break, they can return to the group. It is even better for the teacher to infuse movement breaks for the whole class, which will benefit all young children.

Facilitating Peer Play and Interaction

- Given that the lack of engagement and social reciprocity are two of the core symptoms of ASD, this can be very challenging. From my experience, an enthusiastic aid or classroom staff can learn to facilitate play if there is the proper support and emphasis placed upon this area. They can then serve as a role model to the whole preschool community. Unfortunately, I do not see this happening much during my preschool observations. There are many excellent preschools in the area which are very open and accepting of children with disabilities. Outside service agencies need to provide the right supports and expertise so that the experience of neurodivergent children attending typical settings is most beneficial.
- Being at school can be very difficult for these children. Kids with ASD have difficulty processing information coming in through their senses. Groups are more challenging, especially if loud, chaotic or unpredictable. Children are more unpredictable than adults. This can contribute to autistic preschoolers feeling stuck in a state of chronic anxiety. When their narrow comfort zone is challenged with outside sensory stimuli, they may withdraw or act out. Behavior problems should be understood in this context.

Creative Ways for Aid to facilitate play with Peers: It is not enough to say, "Go play with your classmates!" or to simply ask the peers to include Shari in their game. Skillful facilitation is needed. Sharing and turn taking, while important, are not enough to lead to joyful, spontaneous reciprocal social interactions, which are the basis of friendships. Free play, snack/meals, and playground time are the best opportunities to facilitate peer interaction, given the lack of structure and loosening of expectations at these times.

- The facilitator can call attention to what the autistic child is doing in ways that may interest other kids.

For e.g., while sitting at the lunch table, Kareem lifted his shirt over his head. The aid could say in a curious way, "Where's Kareem, we have lost him." Or "It's the shirt

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monster, I am scared." The other kids will be drawn to the drama and join in. For e.g., they may start looking for Kareem. When he lowers his shirt the aid could say enthusiastically, "There he is!" The aid can feign fear of the "shirt monster." The other children may then try to defend themselves or take on the role of a "shirt monster." It is important that the facilitator narrates with emotion and drama. Kareem may then begin to notice the others' reaction and continue the game on his own. The adult will facilitate as needed. This game may continue every day at lunch time or at other times throughout the day, initiated by Kareem or his peers.

- Call our child's attention to what the classmates are doing.

For example, the facilitator notices two classmates talking about Star Wars. They know that Sandra has seen all the movies and it is one of her passions. The aid says, "Hey, they are talking about Star Wars, lets join in." "Do you guys know that Sandra has seen all the Star Wars movies. Which have you seen?". Sandra is nervous so she is standing near the aid as the aid provides soothing or energizing sensory supports, as needed, as well as serving as an emotional anchor for Sandra. The facilitator may have to repeat the classmates' questions/statements so Sandra can process, they may need to model a slower pace, or help the children ask each other questions about the topic. Sandra's classmates are impressed with her knowledge of Star Wars and it is a positive social interaction for all.

- Engage the children at different levels:

For e.g., Emma goes around the playground feeling poles and trees in a repetitive manner by herself. The aid tells a few classmates that Emma is a safety inspector whose job is to check out all the equipment for safety and the trees for durability. The other children start to follow Emma around as she is "checking." To Emma, she is engaging in pleasurable sensory experiences with others following her idea. It feels great. To the rest of group, it turns into an imaginative play scenario that is developmentally appropriate and engaging for them. They become Emma's assistants and take on different roles in the pretend game.

- The child may need the help of the facilitator to keep up with their peers physically due to motor planning challenges. For e.g., guide them or run with them holding their hand to keep with the group. The aid may guide but should not force the child in any direction. The child will likely withdraw if they feel forced to join the group. The aid, with the help of the classmate(s), should try to entice the child to join in with others. Sometimes holding the hand of a peer will be more beneficial than that of an adult so

that the child feels included. In the inspection game, when Emma wandered off, the facilitator could say, "Oh no, Emma is lost." Inevitably, the other children would go find her and guide her back, so the game could continue.

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Other ideas:

- Follow the Leader: The classmates do what the neurodivergent child does. It may take a while, but the child will eventually notice and enjoy it. Children with developmental challenges are used to following the ideas of others, so it is empowering for them to get a chance to be the leader.
- Semi-structured games that the neurodivergent child can learn and practice at home at a slower pace. Then, they can keep up with classmates when the games are played at school. For e.g., Duck Duck Goose, Musical Chairs, Red Light/Green Light and Freeze Dance. The competitive aspects of the game should be de-emphasized.
- Encourage peers to communicate directly with the child instead of through an adult (and vice versa).
- Point out to the neurodivergent child when others in the class have strong emotions and try to explain why. When our child is upset, unless it is something embarrassing or personal, the aid may include a friend in the conversation about why they are experiencing the strong emotion. These can be important opportunities for increasing emotional understanding, Theory of Mind, empathy, etc.

For the Facilitator, it is important to always think about how your actions may lead to greater inclusion for the identified child.

For example, a great aid I worked with made an understandable mistake. She loved kids and knew it was important to bond with his classmates. On the playground, she began to pretend to be monster, which always led to a group of children chasing her in a joyful manner. This was great fun for all. However, her assigned child avoided the chaos and was left on his own. For the next several days, as soon as they reached the playground, a group of children would begin to chase the aid making it impossible to include her assigned child, who did not have the physical ability to keep up with the group. It took a while until the aid was able to facilitate a different type of play that was more suited to her assigned child's profile.

Important Overarching Goals of Preschool Inclusion:

- The child experiences themselves as valued and as a full member of the community.

- The child establishes a good sense of self due to the positive interactions with others in the preschool community.
- The child gains confidence in peer interactions.

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- The child feels “known” by not only the adults in the class, but from their classmates as well.
- Relationships form that can be deepened outside preschool by play dates, invitations to birthday parties, etc.
- “Atypical Behaviors” are analyzed in light of each child’s unique sensory processing and motor planning profile and communication level.

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