Class 15

Special Needs

Articles:

"Lurning Disabilities"

Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Books That Portray Characters with Disabilities

Learning in an Inclusive Community

Overview of Special Education Law

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)

What is a 504 Plan?

The ABCs of the IEP Meeting: What a Parent Should Know

Discussion Questions:

What are learning disabilities?

What are the characteristics of autism? What are the characteristics of Asperger's syndrome?

Identify some of the ways to arrange the preschool environment to promote success for all students?

Is it a good classroom strategy to read aloud books that portray characters with disabilities? Explain your answer.

What are some of the ways in which students differ from one another in an inclusive classroom?

How does an inclusive classroom benefit all students?

What is an IEP?

What is a 504 Plan?

‘Lurning Disbilities’

By Joanne Donohue Devine

Many grown-ups still think of September, not January, as the beginning of the New Year. The parents who buy the stiff, new notebooks, the still-pink pencil erasers and the jars of white paste (what a taste!) for their children are themselves transported back to classrooms they occupied more than a few Septembers ago. And, for most, the memories are comfortable and friendly.

But there have always been some students for whom the August countdown is the Doomsday calendar. These are the students who hate school and do very poorly there. And this school year is no different: there are many children for whom learning school subjects is a very, very difficult undertaking.

In the classrooms of yesterday, these poorer students were termed "lazy"; their parents were told that their children could do better if they would just: A) cooperate more, B) listen better, C) pay more attention, D) stop daydreaming, E) all of the above.

As they moved through the grades, many of these students developed disruptive behaviors to conceal their *real* learning problems. They also grew to accept, as fact, what teachers, fellow students, even their parents told them — that they weren't very smart and couldn't handle an intellectual challenge.

But fortunately, today, teachers and parents alike realize that students with "learning differences" are not stupid, retarded or lazy. Indeed, so-called learning-disabled students are frequently very bright, and many are intellectually gifted. Moreover, because their learning styles make receiving information more difficult, they often *try harder* than most of their classmates.

> Students with so-called learning disabilities are frequently very bright, and many of them are intellectually gifted.

Today, there is also a greater public awareness that learning disabilities are relatively common: Out of 100 students, 15 to 20 will be learning-disabled; out of 10 learning-disabled students, eight or nine of them will be boys.

There are many theories about why so many more boys than girls have learning problems. Among them: Brain organization is different in boys; boys develop more slowly than girls; learning patterns are a sex-linked characteristic; or maybe just that schools are styled around girls' skills ("Teacher, may I sharpen my pencil? It's not super-pointy and I'm *always* neat!").

'Disruptive' Children

One common symptom of a learning-disabled child is that he has been labeled as disruptive or uncooperative in the classroom. In the same way that academic information is not always correctly received by his brain, his reading of social situations can also be incorrect. The child who knocks down another's block structure, laughs, and then proceeds to tumble yet another child's blocks may not *recognize* an angry reaction when he sees one. He or she may not be "deliberately disobedient," but rather may have a perceptive learning disability.

In today's classrooms, teachers recognize that there are many different learning styles and that the ideal learning environment addresses a wide variety of them. We humans process information that comes to us through what are called learning modalities, a fancy way of saying "ways of learning." (*See box.*)

Our "visual modality" brings learning through our eyes; our "auditory modality" brings learning through our ears; our "kinesthetic modality" brings learning in all the other ways. The feel and smell and weight of something, for example, is information that we get kinesthetically. But to maximize our information-gathering system, we frequently combine modalities. For example, we may *touch* a garment before we buy it, even though we already know what it *looks* like.

Why does it happen, even in the best classrooms, and with wonderfully supportive parents, that some children do not learn? While no one is equally strong in all modalities, it sometimes happens that one or more modality is very weak.

Today, teachers recognize that there are many different learning styles and that the ideal learning environment addresses a wide variety of them.

For example, an 8-year-old who calls a hospital a "hopsital" is showing a pattern of reversals in his auditory mode. The child who confuses the lower case letters "d," "b," "p" and "q," who sees "was" but says "saw," is demonstrating a difficulty in the visual area. Because it is normal for very young children to do these things, many parents don't notice a problem when the pattern persists into the primary grades.

Common Problems

Learning disability describes a problem in the way information is received and perceived by the brain. Learning disabilities have several different labels. Among the most common are dyslexia, attention deficit disorder (ADD), developmental disability, sensory motor delay and learning deficit.

The most common therapy for learning disabilities is "remediation," which involves identifying the individual's strongest modality and developing it so that he can work around the problem areas, compensating for the weakness.

It is interesting to note that many of the world's creative geniuses, great athletes and even statesmen have been learning-disabled. For example, Leonardo Da Vinci's difficulty with "mirror-writing" may have compelled him to express his creativity in art and design. Likewise, Albert Einstein's speech impediment may have motivated him to devote all his energies to the physical sciences. Indeed, most people experiencing learning disabilities choose professions in which they feel competent and comfortable and where their problem will probably remain a secret.

It very often happens that the only reminder of a worked-around learning disability is a son (more likely) or a daughter who shows signs of having inherited the same learning patterns as those that made his or her parents strong in some areas and weak in others.

Steps Considered

In a practical order, how should parents deal with the possibility that a son or daughter has a learning disability? There are a number of steps that should be considered.

First, if a child complains of not enjoying school — aside from the usual rigors of homework — try to find out what, specifically, he finds exceptionally difficult. If a classmate is bullying your child or if he is having a hard time being the "new kid," consult his teacher to minimize those problems. But if the problem is specific subjects or tasks — such as arithmetic, spelling, or even general study skills — there may a learning difference and a discussion with the teacher and/or school principal about further testing is in order.

Ask the teacher if your child's progress is appropriate for his grade level. Set a deadline a month or two in the future when you will meet again with the teacher to review the progress that has, or has not, been made.

If the problems persist, request that your child be tested for learning disabilities by the district educational psychologist (a specialist in educational assessment). While teachers are frequently very skilled at recognizing learning problems, they are not usually qualified to make the formal diagnosis.

If your child is not in public school, discuss available testing and procedures related to it with the school principal. He or she will know the local school district's policy on testing children who reside in the district but who do not attend public school.

Consult the family pediatrician. Parents should openly express their concern about a possible learning disability with their child's doctor, so that together they can consider the advisability of consulting with a pediatric neurologist for further help. Such medical specialists can evaluate the child and propose whatever treatment may be in order to help deal with *physically based* learning disabilities. (Your health insurance will probably cover this evaluation, although it will probably not cover testing done privately by an educational psychologist.)

Acknowledge the Problem

The most important thing a parent must do for a learning-disabled student is acknowledge that there is a problem and seek help. The earlier a child's problem is diagnosed the earlier remediation can begin. Parents who complain that their child doesn't read because the school's books are boring, or who are waiting for Junior to outgrow a very short attention span, are delaying the intervention which may lead to school success.

By the fourth grade, reading is more than just a school subject; it is a critical tool in amassing knowledge in math, science, social studies and language arts. Children who struggle every hour of every day only to fall more and more behind suffer a loss of self-esteem.

Strategies for remediation of learning-disabled students vary widely from school to school and depending on the particular academic and social developmental levels of the child.

Some children are instructed in a "pull-out" program. They spend most of the school day with their regular class, but then leave for individual or small-group instruction in a classroom down the hall. (A common, and legitimate gripe of teachers and parents is that students are usually "pulled-out" of the subjects where they would most benefit from staying put.) Others are instructed in special classes specifically designed for and usually including only learning-disabled students.

Tailored Curriculum

Because each student's needs are unique, the curriculum must be tailored to address those needs. Parents, principal, teachers, school psychologists and anyone else involved in the education of a learning-disabled student should meet on a regular basis to plan and assess the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) for that child.

A Federal statute, Public Law 94-142, states that learning-disabled children have the right to an appropriate education. School districts which cannot provide that education sometimes pay the tuition for special private schools that are specifically set up for these students, although, in fact, many school districts are very reluctant to do this.

Not all students need special classes. Many learning-disabled students get help from after-school programs or from individual tutoring.

On the home front, emphasize the many areas in which your child does do well. Children who see themselves as competent contributors in their families and communities are better behaved and are better students whether they are learning disabled or not. Emphasize what they *can do* and not what they can't.

In the final analysis, keep in mind one of the basic lessons every good teacher impresses upon students: Like the leaves of autumn, each child is different and each child is special. ■

HOW WE LEARN

Each person's learning style is unique, and it is revised and redefined all through life. However, the younger the child, the more he relies on the kinesthetic modality — the feel, smell and weight of things. Babies put everything in their mouths because this is their most sensitive kinesthetic organ. A pacifier, a "blankie" and a thumb are all tactile comforters. Chewing on a piece of furniture may seem a strange way to learn about it, but baby now knows its texture, temperature, firmness or softness, and will eventually call on that tactile memory when he sees a similar piece of furniture.

No one is equally strong in all modalities. We've all been in situations that illustrate this. Imagine you are at a large social gathering and have just been introduced to a few fellow party-goers. A few minutes later, a friend asks you the name of the woman in the green dress with whom you were just speaking and you can't remember it. Are you "losing it"? Probably not; most of us are not strong auditory learners.

But if Mrs. Green had been wearing a "HELLO MY NAME IS" sticker (and you looked at it) chances are you would have remembered her name because you both saw and heard it. And if you had been the person who sat at the door writing names below "HELLO," it would probably have been very easy for you to recall Mrs. Green's name, because you combined several learning modalities: You looked at Mrs. Green, wrote her name, saw it and were able to associate all these phenomena together.

Good teachers have always recognized the different learning modalities, by using an "umbrella" approach in their teaching styles. In arithmetic, for example, they may give students buttons or other things they can touch (called manipulatives by educators) to count. Or to teach students their multiplication tables, they may use verbal drills, as well as flash cards.

In reading, teachers understand that some students, because they are kinesthetic learners, need to touch the words on the page, or move their lips, as they read.

We've all smiled at the sight of a child (or grown-up) working with the tongue showing between the lips, but teachers know that this person is really, really concentrating and using more than one modality, just like the folks who read the Gospel from the Missalette at Mass while it is being read to them by the priest. ■

'TEACHER DISABILITY'

Vicky Goodstudent has always lived up to her name. She's excited about starting fifth grade and meeting her new teacher, Mrs. Killer. Within a few weeks, however, she has all the classic symptoms of school phobia: She has a stomach ache every morning, headaches starting at 8 p.m. each Sunday, and her bad moods have spread to the rest of the family. She bursts into tears with only a little teasing from Big Brother, who is using this new power every chance he gets. The whole family is affected by Vicky's school problem.

Vicky's parents meet with Mrs. Killer. The woman describes Vicky as a good student with no problems. But, in talking with other parents, Mr. and Mrs. Goodstudent discover there are problems in that classroom.

The teacher has no control, she doesn't correct homework assignments ("File it in the round file!"), she punishes the *whole* group for the misbehavior of a *few*, she shows preference for students of one sex over the other and she has threatened to penalize anyone who complains to parents.

Mrs. Killer has "teacher disability," and a parental conference with the school principal is definitely in order.

Warning signs of teacher disability include the tendency to berate or bully students who are not doing well, the inability to work with students and their parents in alternative ways, or hostility to any variation from "tried-and-true" methods Mrs. Killer — or Mr. Killer — has clung to for years. Not all teachers have the stamina to deal with a room full of children every day for years, and even very good teachers "burn out."

Furthermore, it sometimes happens that a particular, even excellent teacher may not be the best teacher for your child. Teacher-student matches are a very personal thing, and one child's favorite instructor may be causing school phobia in another.

But parents should remember that the first few weeks of school are a time of adjustment for their child. They may need to take a "wait-and-see" attitude before predicting how good a school year this one is going to be. However, if their student doesn't seem to be settling in well, parents should, by all means, consult with higher educational authority. ■

Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Strategies That Work

Alexis is new to Ms. Roxanne's preschool classroom and spends a lot of time wringing her hands and staring out the window. She has been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, one of five conditions classified as an autism spectrum disorder. Roxanne wonders about Asperger's and what she can do to help Alexis adjust to being in the classroom.

CLARISSA WILLIS

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) affects about one and a half million people in the United States. One in every 150 babies is diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, and boys are four times more likely than girls to have a form of the neurological disorder (Autism Society of America 2006). Many children with ASD, especially those with Asperger's syndrome, are fully included in regular early childhood classrooms with their typically developing peers (Willis 2009).

The term *spectrum* is used because the characteristics of the disorder occur along a continuum, with severe symptoms at one end and very mild behaviors at the other.

ASD is a broad-based term under which there are five recognized types of autism. The term *spectrum* is used because the characteristics of the disorder occur along a continuum, with severe symptoms at one end and very mild behaviors at the other. Where a child falls on the continuum helps determine how to plan for his education. For example, a child may be at the mild end in his ability to communicate with others, but at the severe end regarding his behavior around others.

ASD is a medical condition usually diagnosed by a developmental pediatrician and/or a team of specialists that may include a speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist, or child psychologist. Early intervention offering behavorial, social, and skill-building training is vital. Most children with ASD have an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) or an Individual Education Program (IEP) in place by the time they enter the classroom. These plans are designed with input from the child's family and can serve as a guide for planning activities and making modifications to the curriculum. They outline the broad goals and objectives written with a child's individual strengths and weaknesses in mind.

This article discusses the major characteristics associated with autism and offers some simple strategies for helping children with autism function in preschool settings (see "Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder"). While each child with autism is unique and exhibits characteristic/symptomatic behaviors in varying degrees, most children diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder have difficulty with communication and social relationships, including interactive play; display behaviors not typical of their peers; and respond to sensory stimuli by screaming or reacting strongly to light, sound, or motion (Sicile-Kira 2004).

Families and educators should focus on what the child can learn, rather than what cannot be learned.

It is important to view a child with autism as a person with talents, strengths, and potential. In other words, families and educators should focus on what the child can learn, rather than what cannot be learned. Remember,

- Always put the child first. He is a "child with autism" not an "autistic child." Use the child's name as often as possible.
- Each child is unique, and no two children with autism have the same strengths and weaknesses.

Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism	To be diagnosed with autism, a child must exhibit a significant number of the following characteristics: a significant delay in social interaction, such as eye contact or expression; a communication delay; behaviors including stereotypical behavior, such as intense, almost obsessive, preoccupation with objects; the need for nonfunctional and ritualistic routines, such as lining up books or food in a certain manner; and repeated movements, such as finger popping or hand flapping.
Pervasive development disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS)	This classification is used when it is determined that a child has autism, but the characteristics displayed by the child are not like the characteristics of other children with autism. This diagnosis is also used when the onset of the disorder happens after age 3. Of all the autism classifications, this is the most vague and confusing for both families and teachers. However, this classification allows a child with a few, but not all, of the characteristics of autism to be classified as having autism, so that he can receive needed services.
Asperger's syndrome	Children with Asperger's typically behave much like children with other types of autism when they are young. However, as they grow into middle school age or in adolescence, they often learn how to socialize, communicate, and behave in a more socially acceptable manner. Most children with Asperger's have normal or above normal intelligence, so they learn new skills as quickly or in many cases more quickly than their typical peers.
Rett's syndrome	This is a degenerative disorder, meaning it gets worse with time. It begins in the first two years of life and is found almost exclusively in girls. Unlike other types of autism, children with Rett's develop normally prior to the onset of the disorder. Characteristics include loss of motor skills, hand-wringing or repetitive hand washing, and a decrease in head growth. Seizures and sleeping disorders may also develop.
Childhood disintegrative disorder	Sometimes called Heller's syndrome, this is a degenerative condition in which a child may begin to develop normally but start to lose skills or seem to forget how to do things over a few months. Loss of skills usually happens in the area of toilet training, play, language, or problem solving, typically between ages 3 and 4.

Adapted with permission from C. Willis, *Teaching Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House, 2006).

- Not all information about autism (including what is shown on television and found on the Internet) is accurate.
- While there are several approaches to teaching a child with autism, there is no single method, specific program, or magic cure that can *fix* autism. Many programs and methods are successful with some children, yet may not be successful with others (Willis 2006).

How Might a Child with Autism Behave in My Classroom?

Children with an autism spectrum disorder may display in varying degrees some or all of the following behaviors: obsession with specific objects, such as collecting forks or having an attachment to a piece of cloth; prolonged interest in common occurrences like watching water as it swirls down the drain; adherence to rituals, such as arranging food in a certain order; and repetitive (stereotypic) behaviors like hand flapping or repeating the same phrase over and over.

What Is Stereotypic Behavior?

Stereotypic behavior is usually defined as a behavior carried out repeatedly and involving either movement of the child's body or movement of an object (Edelson 1995). Some of the most common stereotypic behaviors seen in young children with autism include flapping one or both hands, pulling or tapping the ears, rocking back and forth or from side to side, sniffing the air, or sucking on the upper lip.

Stereotypic actions allow the children to move further into their own world and away from reality. While stereotypic behavior is not usually physically harmful, it often interferes with a child's ability to focus on what is going on around her (Lee, Odom, & Loftin 2007). Of course, all children, from time to time, tune out activities they want to avoid. Unlike typically developing children, however, many children with autism learn that by doing a specific thing, such as rocking, they can consistently tune out everything around them.

Knowing the reason for a behavior can often help teachers determine what a child is trying to communicate through his or her actions.

Attempting to understand the function behind the behavior is important. Knowing the reason for a behavior can often help teachers determine what a child is trying to communicate through his or her actions. Behavior specialists and teachers can work together to conduct a functional behavior assessment, which involves observing the child's particular behavior across time to help determine its function.

How Do We Know What a Child with Autism Is Trying to Communicate with a Behavior?

It is very difficult for a teacher to be responsive when she does not know what a child is trying to say. To try to understand the child's communication, ask yourself the following questions:

1. **What was the child doing immediately before the behavior started?** For example, if Aaron is sitting down for small group time and suddenly stands up and screams, his teacher can try to recall what occurred just before his outburst. Perhaps she had stopped interacting with him and is now talking to the group. If Aaron typically has a tantrum during group activities, it may indicate that he is using the tantrum to regain the teacher's attention.
2. **What in the environment might have triggered the behavior, outburst, or tantrum?** Did something make a loud noise? Did the classroom suddenly get brighter? Is there a smell unfamiliar to the child?
3. **What is the child trying to say by his behavior?** Sometimes a child will act a certain way as a protest, while other times she may cry out to express "There's too much going on here; I can't think!" One key to identifying the function of a child's behavior is to look at what happens after the behavior. If the child's tantrums are often followed by some kind of interaction with an adult (even if the interaction seems negative), the child may be communicating (in a maladaptive way) that he wants attention.
4. **Can I predict when the child will behave in a certain way?** The behaviors of children with autism are not always predictable. However, sometimes knowing what will happen next can allow a teacher to step in to prevent an outburst. If Candice starts biting herself every day after coming in from the playground, it is probably safe to assume that she enjoys being outside and does not want to come indoors. In this case, the teacher can try cuing Candice with a special signal right before it is time to come inside. This gives the child time to end the activity she is enjoying and transition to the next one.

Other Ways a Child with Autism Might Communicate

Approximately 40 percent of all children with ASD are nonverbal (Charlop & Haymes 1994). However, just because a child is nonverbal, it does not mean she cannot learn to communicate. Several alternative or augmentative forms of communication are used with children with autism. These include

Sign language. Some children with autism can use the same signs used by people who are deaf.

Communication devices. Computer-like tools can speak for the child when activated by the push of a button or selection of a picture.

Communication pictures. A child can point to specific pictures to tell what is happening, what he needs, or what he wants. Many children with autism respond better to real pictures than to line drawings (Willis 2009).

Among the many tools commercially developed for children with communication deficits is the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) (Frost & Bondy 1994). PECS is simple to use, relatively inexpensive, and helps children with autism develop a way to communicate with others (Charlop-Christy et al. 2002). Because of communication and behavior issues, many children with ASD do not initiate interactions with others. What makes the PECS system unique is that, unlike other systems of communication, it requires that the child initiate interaction by using a representative picture (Bondy 2001). In general, when used consistently, the PECS helps children with autism have more meaningful communication interactions. Communication with others is an important social skill that helps any child make friends.

What Do We Do When a Child Won't Interact with Others?

Because children with autism generally do not initiate interactions, social skills training, including how to respond in social situations, should begin as early as possible and continue throughout the child's education (Stichter & Conroy 2006). Some strategies can help a child learn how to greet people and introduce himself (for an example, see "Strategy 1: Making New Friends").

It is important to work with the child's family and other teachers and specialists to prioritize which social skills should be taught. Learning too many new skills without enough time for practice can be overwhelming, and the child may react with maladaptive behavior. To encourage positive social interactions, it is vital to structure the environment to help the child succeed.

How Do We Arrange a Preschool Environment for Success?

Children with autism function best when they have

- structure and a predictable routine,
- environments that do not distract,
- verbal reminders of what will happen next, and
- picture schedules.

Teachers should define the environment as much as possible for a child with autism. To reduce the child's anxiety, create and post in each center or learning area a picture schedule using photographs or other images to display the day's events. The child can look at the picture to get an idea of what is supposed to occur in that area. Children with autism like to know what they are supposed to do, so a picture schedule is reassuring.

In learning centers, teachers also can set up activities that encourage interaction, such as group art projects or activities

Strategy 1: Making New Friends

Objective: To help develop social interaction by showing the child how to introduce himself.

1. Make an introduction cue card with two cues, one for the child's name and one to remind him to wait for the other person to respond. If possible, laminate the card.
2. Explain to the child that the cue card will help him know what to do when he meets someone new.
3. Ask several children to help you and the child practice meeting people.
4. Sit in a circle and practice what to say and how to wait for the other person to respond.
5. Remind the children that when you are meeting someone for the first time, it is a good idea to look at him or her.
6. Look for opportunities for the child to practice using the cue card to introduce himself.

Helpful Hints

- When the child becomes familiar with this routine, add additional cues, such as one showing something that he likes to do or asking a new friend to play a game.
- Make a set of cue cards for the child to take home.
- Alert the family that the child is working on introducing himself and other social skills, so they can help him practice.

Adapted with permission from C. Willis, *Teaching Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House, 2006).

that require two people to complete them. Remember, children with autism may not be particularly interested in an activity or specific center. Allowing use of a child's preferred object can greatly increase the probability that the child will take part in an activity (Schwartz, Billingsley, & McBride 1998).

Transitions are times when a child with autism is likely to have an outburst. Plan smooth transitions. Music makes an excellent transition tool. Use the same song for each transition so the child learns that the song is a cue that something new is about to happen.

Here are some other ideas to facilitate smooth transitions:

- Go with the child to the picture schedule and point to the next activity.
- Set a timer to indicate that in a few minutes it will be time to change activities. Hourglass timers are less distracting than timers with loud continuous bells.
- Tap the child gently on the shoulder as a cue that it is almost time to stop.
- Ring a service bell (with one quick ring) or soft chime, such as wind chimes, as a reminder that it is time to change activities.

Note that making loud noises or flashing lights on and off are not good ways to signal transitions for a child with autism. The sensory stimulation can be overwhelming.

It is critical to remember that most children with autism will, in some fashion, have difficulty with sensory stimuli. They require an environment that is sensitive to their unique needs.

Why Do Children with Autism Have Difficulty with Sensory Stimuli?

Most children with autism have some form of sensory integration disorder whereby they cannot filter or screen out sensory-related input (Kranowitz 2005). The common "feely box" that many preschool teachers use to introduce new textures can be very distressing for many children with autism. For them, the information they receive from their environment—such as through a feely box—becomes distorted and unreliable.

The quiet center is also a space where a child can go to complete especially stressful activities, such as counting, working a puzzle, or writing her name.

Children with autism need a special place in the classroom where they can go without distraction and without all the sensory input they receive elsewhere. Locate this place in the quietest part of the room and provide soft, indirect lighting, a comfortable chair or cushion, and some activities that the child likes. Teachers should always be able to observe the child in the special place. This quiet center is also a space where a child can go to complete especially stressful activities, such as counting, working a puzzle, or writing her name (Willis 2006).

After the child spends time in the quiet center, allow her to return and finish any activity she started before visiting the quiet center. Quiet centers should be used routinely to allow the child to be in a place where she feels safe and secure. They should *never* be used as a form of punishment.

How Can We Prepare for a Child with Autism?

The best way teachers can prepare themselves and the other children in the class for a child with autism is to get to know as much as possible about the child before enrollment. Encourage the family to come with their child to visit your classroom before the first day of school. This initial visit is an opportunity to meet the family and the child and let him become familiar with the classroom. This introductory visit should happen when other children are not present, and more than one visit may be necessary. One way to help a child learn more about his new classroom is to take the child on a classroom hunt (see "Strategy 2: Classroom Hunt—I Spy!").

Strategy 2: Classroom Hunt—I Spy!

Objective: To encourage the child with autism to explore areas of the classroom, interact with toys, or try new activities.
Materials: A basket with a handle and one item from each learning center.

1. Gather one representative item from each of the centers in the room—a block from the block area, a magnetic letter from the literacy center, a paintbrush from the art area, a book from the reading center, and so on.
2. Place the items in a basket or box. A basket works best because you can carry it on your arm. The child may even want to carry it for you.
3. Tell the child you need help putting the things in your basket back in the centers where they belong.
4. Start each hunt with the same phrase, "Here is a ____. I wonder where it goes."
5. Refocus a child who looks away or appears disinterested by holding the item in front of her.
6. Hold up an object and ask, "____ [the child's name], where do you think this goes?"
7. Prompt a child who does not reply or does not take the object by walking to a center and asking, "Do you think it goes here?"
8. When the child figures out where the object belongs, ask her to place the item in/on the correct bin or shelf. Continue with the other objects in the basket.

Helpful Hints

- Say the name of the object aloud.
- Vary the activity. For example, if you use picture cards, match the object to the correct picture card before returning it to its proper location.
- Put the object in the wrong location if the child appears uninterested or bored. Wait to see if she corrects you. Sometimes, even nonverbal children have an extraordinary sense of place and know in fine detail where items belong.

(Later, after the child has gotten used to being at school, it might be fun to do the activity with a second child so that the three of you look for the correct center.)

Adapted with permission from C. Willis, *Teaching Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House, 2006).

Many preschools have a family information form, but you will need to find out much more about the child than is typically included on such forms. Here are some questions to ask the family before a child with ASD arrives at the program:

1. What does she like to eat? Are there foods that she will not eat or that cause her to react in a certain way?
2. What are her particular interests? Does she have an object that she is attached to?
3. Does she have a favorite activity or song?
4. How does she communicate with others?
5. What might cause her to become upset or frustrated?
6. What do you see as her strengths?
7. What do you consider her challenges?
8. What other services has she been receiving? Speech therapy? Occupational therapy? Who provides the services? How often and in what setting?
9. What do you do when/if she has an outburst at home?
10. How much experience has she had interacting with other children?
12. What is her daily routine?

How Do We Set up the Daily Routine for a Child with Autism?

Children with autism are less frustrated when they can follow predictable and organized routines. When setting up a daily routine for a child with autism, it is important for the child to understand what you are asking him to do. How the day begins often determines how the child will behave during the rest of the day. If there is any variation in the schedule, even a minor change, let the child know in advance.

When the child arrives, greet him and discuss the daily schedule. Use familiar picture cards to show each activity for the day. Make sure the schedule is on a level the child can understand. For some children, this may be an object schedule, and for others, a simple first–then card. A first–then card is a series of picture pairs in which the first shows what happens first and the second shows what happens next (Small & Kontente 2003; Willis 2006). When possible, use the identical daily routines, such as saying the same morning greeting each day (see "Strategy 3: Morning Greeting").

Concluding Thoughts

Jim Sinclair puts it best: "Autism isn't something a person has, or a 'shell' that a person is trapped inside. There's no normal child hidden behind the autism. Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive; it colors every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion, and encounter, every aspect of existence. It is not possible to separate the autism from the person—and if it were possible, the person you'd have left would not be the same person you started with" (1993, n.p.).

All children can learn, and children with autism spectrum disorder are no exception. To help them be as successful as possible in your classroom, remember that they function best when they have the following:

- structure and a predictable routine,
- environments that do not distract,
- verbal reminders of what will happen next,
- picture schedules to give them clues about what to do,
- a quiet place to go where they can be alone for a few minutes, and
- nothing to overwhelm their senses with too much light or noise.

Strategy 3: Morning Greeting

Objective: To establish a morning routine that starts the day on a positive note.

1. Use the same words and phrases each day, perhaps something as simple as "Good morning, *[child's name]*." Wait to see if the child responds, then say, "Let's check and see what we do first."
2. Bend down to eye level and use a picture schedule to show the child what you want him to do.
3. Try singing to a child who does not respond to a spoken welcome. You might sing the following to the tune of "Three Blind Mice" (first verse):

   [Child's name], welcome.
   [Child's name], welcome.
   I'm glad you're here.
   I'm glad you're here.

4. Direct the child to his cubby. If he hesitates, walk with him. A picture of the child above the cubby will help him identify it more easily. Show him the picture cards that relate to putting up his backpack, coat, and so on.
5. Tell him what to do next: "After you put up your backpack, go to the ____ center." Even if you start the day with independent center time, direct the child to a specific place each morning.
6. Say or sign thank you.
7. Guide the child to the center if he does not go on his own; walk with him.
8. Vary the welcome only after he is accustomed to the morning routine. For example, suggest two or more center choices. Expect that when you first tell him to choose where he wants to go, he will likely stand still or hide in his cubby.

Helpful Hints

- Stay focused on your primary objective, which is to start each day with a calm and predictable sequence.
- Keep in mind, regardless of your morning routine, that consistency will make the child with autism feel more secure.
- Accept that some children, even children without autism, are just not morning people and need a little more time to wake up. If the child is prone to rugged mornings, begin each day by allowing him to go to the quiet center until he has adjusted to the routine.
- Make sure that when you are absent, the substitute or teacher's assistant follows your morning welcome routine.

Adapted with permission from C. Willis, *Teaching Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House, 2006).

References

Autism Society of America. 2006. *Autism facts.* www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about_whatis_factsstats

Bondy, A. 2001. PECS: Potential benefits and risks. *The Behavior Analyst Today* 2 (2): 127–32.

Charlop, M.H., & L.K. Haymes. 1994. Speech and language acquisition and intervention: Behavioral approaches. In *Autism in children and adults: Etiology, assessment, and intervention,* ed. J.L. Matson. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Charlop-Christy, M.H., M. Carpenter, L. Loc, L. LeBlanc, & K. Kellet. 2002. Using the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) with children with autism: Assessment of the PECS acquisition, speech, social-communicative behavior, and problem behavior. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* 35 (3): 213–31.

Edelson, S. 1995. Stereotypic (self-stimulatory) behavior. www.autism.org/stim.html

Frost, L.A., & A.S. Bondy. 1994. *The Picture Exchange Communication System training manual.* Cherry Hill, NJ: Pyramid Educational Consultants.

Kranowitz, C. 2005. *The out-of-sync child: Recognizing and coping with sensory processing disorder.* New York: Perigee.

Lee, S., S.L. Odom, & R. Loftin. 2007. Social engagement with peers and stereotypic behavior of children with autism. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* 9 (2): 67–79.

Schwartz, I.S., F. Billingsley, & B. McBride. 1998. Including children with autism in inclusive preschools: Strategies that work. *Young Exceptional Children* 2 (1): 19–26.

Sicile-Kira, C. 2004. *Autism spectrum disorders.* New York: Penguin.

Sinclair, J. 1993. Don't mourn for us. *Our Voice: The Newsletter of the Autism Network International* 1 (3). http://ani.autistics.org/dont_mourn.html

Small, M., & L. Kontente. 2003. *Everyday solutions: A practical guide for families of children with autism spectrum disorder.* Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing.

Stichter, J.P., & M.A. Conroy. 2006. *How to teach social skills and plan for peer social interactions.* Series on autism spectrum disorders. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.

Willis, C. 2006. *Teaching young children with autism spectrum disorder.* Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.

Willis, C. 2009. *Creating inclusive learning environments for young children: What to do on Monday morning.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Clarissa Willis, PhD, is a speaker and consultant based in Winston-Salem, North Carolina; author of *Teaching Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder* and *Creating Inclusive Learning Environments for Young Children;* and coauthor of *Inclusive Literacy Lessons for Early Childhood.* In addition to earning a doctorate in early childhood special education, Clarissa worked more than 20 years in schools and child development centers and as a speech pathologist. Clarissa@clarissawillis.com

From *Young Children,* January 2009, pp. 81–82, 84–89. Copyright © 2009 by National Association for the Education of Young Children. Reprinted by permission. [Boxed text on pp. 72, 74, 75, 76 from *Autism Spectrum Disorder,* by Clarissa Willis, (ISBN 978-0-87659-008-9), and reprinted with permission from Gryphon House, Inc., Silver Spring, MD, ph. 800-638-0928.]

Books That Portray Characters with Disabilities

A Top 25 List for Children and Young Adults

MARY ANNE PRATER AND TINA TAYLOR DYCHES

Our lives are full of lists. From David Letterman to college or professional sports rankings, lists of the top 10 or top 25 are readily available. In fact, the authors of this article conducted a quick Google search using the phrase top 25 and found Web sites devoted to the top 25 highest-grossing films, innovations, executives, podcasts, lighthouses, cities for doing business in America, and many more. Even books of lists, for example, *The New Book of Lists* (Wallechinsky and Wallace, 2005), are available.

The authors of this article have collectively read and researched the portrayal of disabilities in juvenile literature for nearly 25 years. We have therefore generated our list of the top 25 children's and young adults' books that portray characters with disabilities. To select our list, we applied the Dyches and Prater (2000) guidelines on evaluating books that have high literary and artistic quality as well as multidimensional portrayals of characters with disabilities. These guidelines include analysis of the following:

- Literary quality (e.g., engaging theme or concept woven throughout the story, thoroughly developed plot, credible and multidimensional characters).
- Illustrative quality (e.g., illustrations interpret and extend the story; illustrations are of high quality, including design, layout, and style; Tunnell & Jacobs, 2007).
- Characterization of the characters with disabilities (Dyches & Prater, 2000). This guideline includes elements that are consistent with current knowledge and practices in the field: (a) accurate portrayal of the disability; (b) exemplary practices (e.g., characters are contributors in inclusive settings, with an emphasis on acceptance rather than on rejection and on similarities rather than on differences); (c) realistic sibling relationships, if depicted; (d) appropriate emotional reactions (e.g., respect rather than pity, acceptance rather than ridicule); and (e) accurate illustrations of the disability or assistive devices being used.

This article briefly describes each of the books on our top 25 list to help readers make informed decisions when selecting books that depict characters with disabilities. This list includes 14 chapter books and 11 picture books. The books span a wide range of publication dates—the oldest was first published in 1955, and the most recent appeared in 2006. They depict most of the 13 disabilities recognized by the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004).

To select our list, we applied guidelines on evaluating books that have high literary and artistic quality, as well as multidimensional portrayals of characters with disabilities.

Five of the books received the prestigious Newbery Medal or Honor award, and one is a Caldecott Honor Book. Five additional books earned either the Dolly Gray or Schneider Family Awards. These two awards specifically honor juvenile books that portray disabilities (see box, "Major Book Awards"). Although 14 of the selected books did not win noteworthy awards, they deserve attention for their literary and artistic qualities, as well as their appropriate and realistic portrayals of disabilities.

The following discussion presents the top 25 books in alphabetical order, not rank order. Table 1 indicates the type of disability portrayed, major awards earned, type of book, and grade levels for each of the 25 books. Table 2 presents 10 additional books that almost made the list. The box "Additional Resources" categorizes articles that provide details about selecting appropriate books and Web sites with additional lists of juvenile books portraying characters with disabilities.

Our Top 25 Books

The ADDed Touch tells the story of Matthew, a first grader who has difficulty staying focused, following directions, and controlling his body. His mother takes him to a doctor who diagnoses Matthew as having attention deficit disorder (ADD). Matthew learns that other children in his class also have ADD and that some students who do not have ADD also do not pay attention. At the end of the book, Matthew's family and friends say that he is special, "with an ADDed touch." The book tells the story in rhyme, and the illustrations are simple but delightful. Teachers and parents can use this book with any young child or group of children to teach about ADD.

In *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, a Newbery Honor book, Moose Flanagan and his family, including his 15-year-old sister, Natalie, who has autistic-like characteristics, move to Alcatraz in 1935 so that his father can work as a prison guard and Natalie can attend a special school. However,

Major Book Awards

Caldecott Medal/Honor Book

The American Library Association annually awards the Caldecott Medal, named in honor of 19th-century English illustrator Randolph Caldecott, to the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children. Runner-up books receive the Caldecott Honor Book Award. The Caldecott Medal is the most prestigious award given for children's picture books. For more information, see www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=bookmediaawards&template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=164637 (ALA, 2007).

Dolly Gray Award

The Dolly Gray Award for Children's Literature in Developmental Disabilities, which began in 2000, recognizes authors, illustrators, and publishers of high-quality fictional children's books that appropriately portray individuals with developmental disabilities. Every even year, an author and an illustrator of a children's picture book and the author and illustrator (if appropriate) of a juvenile/young adult chapter book published in the previous 2 years, receive the award. Selection criteria include high literary and illustrative quality, as well as multi-dimensional portrayals of individuals with developmental disabilities. The Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and Special Needs Project, a distributor of books related to disability issues, sponsor this award. For more information, see www.dddcec.org/secondarypages/dollygray/Dolly_Gray_Children%27s_Literature_Award.html (Council for Exceptional Children, Division of Developmental Disabilities, n.d.).

Newbery Medal/Honor Book

The Newbery Medal, named for 18th-century British bookseller John Newbery, is the most prestigious award in children's literature. The American Library Association awards the Newbery Medal annually to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children. Books may also receive recognition as Newbery Honor books. Those books are runners-up to the medal-winning book. For more information see www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=bookmediaawards&template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=149311 (ALA, 2007).

Schneider Family Book Awards

The Schneider Family Award honors an author or illustrator who "embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience" for children and adolescents. The categories for this annual award are as follows: grade school (ages 0–10), middle school (ages 11–13), and teens (ages 13–18). The award-winning books must portray some aspect of living with a disability or having family or friends with a disability. The disability may be physical, mental, or emotional. For more information, see http://www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=awards&template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=163339 (ALA, 2007).

the school does not allow Natalie to attend until Moose and the prison warden's daughter seek help from an unlikely source—the most notorious criminal on the island, Al Capone. This story appeals to both boys and girls, because it weaves sports, infatuation, mystery, and intrigue throughout while depicting a realistic and loving sibling relationship.

The Alphabet War tells the story of Adam, who, because of his difficulty with letter reversals and phonemic awareness, is experiencing his own alphabet war. Adam's frustration increases, and he begins to bother other children or escape through daydreaming. In third grade, he finally receives the help that he needs; and in fourth grade, he develops the confidence to recognize that he is not stupid, just different. The illustrations are the most intriguing and imaginative aspect of this book. For example, they show Adam in a cowboy outfit lassoing the letter A, Adam under a microscope (when he is being assessed), and Adam sitting on the planet Neptune and daydreaming.

Each chapter in *The Bus People* profiles one of the passengers that Bertram, the special-bus driver, transports to and from school each day. Each individual tells his or her own story. The types of disabilities portrayed include muscular dystrophy; traumatic brain injury; Down syndrome; communication disorders; and intellectual, orthopedic, and emotional disabilities. The uniqueness of this book is the portrayal of these individuals from their perspectives. From Micky, whose mother suffocates him with her love, to Fleur, whose loving family accepts her as she is, the book depicts many issues that affect families that include children with disabilities.

Chibi, the main character in *Crow Boy*, is a young boy who has many characteristics of autism. He is different from the other children and often is alone while his classmates study and play. However, after 5 years of school, a friendly new teacher discovers that Chibi can imitate the sounds of crows, and he lets Chibi participate in the talent show. His classmates realize that they had misjudged Chibi. This Caldecott Honor book beautifully demonstrates how children can become more accepting of those who differ from themselves. The book, first published in 1955, has withstood the test of time.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time tells the story of 15-year-old Christopher, who finds his neighbor's dog dead on the front lawn. The police arrest him for killing the dog but soon release him. He then goes to great lengths to solve the mystery of who killed the dog. Christopher takes everything at face value and is unable to understand the behavior of others. This book portrays the thought processes of those on the autism spectrum in amazingly accurate ways. For example, because Christopher is mathematically gifted, the author uses only prime numbers to number the chapters. This book has received great literary acclaim and has won the Dolly Gray Award. (Caution: This book contains strong language.)

In *Dad and Me in the Morning*, Jacob awakens to his flashing alarm clock. He puts on his hearing aids, tiptoes down the hall, and wakes his father. They walk together to the beach to wait for the sunrise. Jacob and his father talk to each other in various ways, including signing, lip reading, or "just squeezing each other's hands." This book is a tender

Table 1 Top 25 Books by Disability, Awards, Type of Book, and Grade Level

Title, Author (Illustrator or photographer, if any), Publisher, and Year	Disability	Awards	Type of Book	Grade Level
The ADDed Touch, Robyn Watson (Susanne Nuccio), Silver Star, 2000	ADHD		Picture	K+
Al Capone Does My Shirts, Gennifer Choldenko, Putnam, 2004	Autism	Newbery Honor	Chapter	5+
The Alphabet War, Diane Burton Robb (Gail Piazza), Whitman, 2004	Learning disabilities		Picture	K+
The Bus People, Rachel Anderson, Holt, 1989	Various disabilities		Chapter	5+
Crow Boy, Taro Yashima, Viking, 1955	Autism	Caldecott Honor	Picture	K+
The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time, Mark Haddon, Random House, 2003	Autism	Dolly Gray	Chapter	9+
Dad and Me in the Morning, Patricia Lakin (Robert G. Steele), Whitman, 1994	Deafness	Schneider Family	Picture	K+
Flying Solo, Ralph Fletcher, Clarion, 1998	Communication disorders		Picture	K+
Freak the Mighty, Rodman Philbrick, Scholastic, 1993	Learning disabilities; orthopedic and other health impairments		Chapter	6+
The Handmade Alphabet, Laura Rankin (Laura Rankin), Dial, 1991	Deafness		Picture	K+
Hank Zipzer Series, Henry Winkler, Penguin Group, 2006	Learning disabilities		Chapter	4+
Hooway for Wodney Wat, Helen Lester (Lynn Munsinger), Houghton Mifflin, 1999	Communication disorders		Picture	K+
Kissing Doorknobs, Terry Spencer Hesser, Delacorte, 1998	Emotional/behavioral disorders		Chapter	7+
Knots on a Counting Rope, Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault (Ted Rand), Holt, 1987	Visual impairment		Picture	K+
Life Magic, Melrose Cooper, Holt, 1996	Other health impairment; learning disabilities		Chapter	4+
Lois Lowry Trilogy, *The Giver* (2000), *Gathering Blue* (2002), and *Messenger*, Delacorte Books for Young Readers, 2005	Various disabilities	Newbery Medal for *The Giver*	Chapter	6+
My Brother Sammy, Becky Edwards and David Armitage, Millbrook, 1999	Autism	Dolly Gray	Picture	K+
Rules, Cynthia Lord, Scholastic, 2006	Autism; orthopedic impairment; communication disorders	Newbery Honor	Chapter	4+
See the Ocean, Estelle Condra (Linda Crockett-Blassingame), Ideals Children's Books, 1994	Visual impairment		Picture	K+
So B. It, Sarah Weeks, HarperCollins, 2004	Intellectual disabilities	Dolly Gray	Chapter	6+
Thank You, Mr. Falker, Patricia Polacco (Patricia Polacco), Philomel, 1998	Learning disabilities		Picture	K+
Tru Confessions, Janet Tashjian, Holt, 1997	Intellectual disabilities	Dolly Gray	Chapter	4+
The View from Saturday, E. L. Konigsburg, Aladdin, 1996	Orthopedic impairment	Newbery Medal	Chapter	4+
The Westing Game, Ellen Raskin, Penguin, 1978	Orthopedic impairment	Newbery Medal	Chapter	4+
Yours Turly, Shirley, Ann M. Martin, Holiday House, 1988	Learning disabilities		Chapter	4+

Table 2 10 More Books That Almost Made the Top 25

Title, Author (Illustrator or photographer, if any), Publisher, and Year	Disability	Awards	Type of Book	Grade Level
The Hard Life of Seymour E. Newton, Ann Bixby Herold, Herold, 1993	Learning disabilities		Chapter	2+
I Am an Artichoke, Lucy Frank, Laurel Leaf, 1993	Emotional/ behavioral disorders		Chapter	7+
Ian's Walk, Laurie Lears (Karen Ritz), Whitman, 1998	Autism	Dolly Gray	Picture	K+
My Louisiana Sky, Kimberly Willis Holt, Random House, 1998	Intellectual disabilities		Chapter	6+
Risk 'n Roses, Jan Slepian, Philomel, 1990	Intellectual disabilities		Chapter	5+
A Single Shard, Linda Sue Park, Random House, 2001	Orthopedic impairments	Newbery	Chapter	5+
Susan Laughs, Jeanne Willis (Tony Ross), Red Fox, 2000	Orthopedic impairments		Picture	K+
We'll Paint the Octopus Red, Stephanie Stuve Bodeen (Pam DeVito), Woodbine, 1998	Developmental disabilities		Picture	K+
Welcome Home, Jellybean, Marlene Fanta Shyer, Scribner's Sons, 1978	Intellectual disabilities		Chapter	5+
Wish on a Unicorn, Karen Hesse, Holt, 1991	Intellectual disabilities		Chapter	4+

portrayal of a boy and his father enjoying the changing colors in the clouds and sky and each other. The illustrations are vivid and striking. This book won the Schneider Family Award.

Flying Solo tells the story of Rachel White, who becomes mute after learning of the sudden death of a slow classmate who had an unrequited, annoying crush on her. Six months later, Rachel and her sixth-grade classmates find themselves without a teacher, and they decide to run the class. By the end of the day, the students have learned much about themselves and one another. The story resolves several issues, and Rachel regains confidence in her voice. The story is engaging for tweens who long for independence, who have concerns about being different or not in the right group, and who dream that their class lacks a teacher for a full day.

Freak the Mighty is a story about two eighth-grade boys. Max, a large and awkward boy whose father is in prison for killing his mother and who has learning disabilities, and Kevin, his small brilliant friend who has orthopedic and health impairments, team up to become Freak the Mighty. The other students taunt and bully Max and Kevin, but Max's physical abilities and Kevin's intellectual abilities allow them to combine their strengths to fight real and imaginary bullies. When Kevin's illness takes his life, Max realizes that he can have a positive attitude about himself. The movie *The Mighty*, based on this book, appeared in 1998.

The Handmade Alphabet is a beautifully illustrated alphabet book that shows each letter as represented in American Sign Language interacting with an object that begins with that letter. Some of our favorite illustrations include the letter I formed with the little finger extended almost touching a melting icicle, a ribbon wrapped around a hand forming the letter R, and an X-ray of a hand forming the letter X. We have included this book on our list even though it does not portray a specific character with a disability. Teachers and parents can use this book to teach students to finger spell and to discuss how individuals who cannot hear communicate with others.

Henry Winkler has co-written a book series entitled *Hank Zipzer: The World's Greatest Underachiever*. These books, which are partly auto-biographical, describe the adventures of Hank Zipzer, who has a learning disability. We decided to include the whole series on this list rather than select favorites because we feel the same way the author feels: "Which of your books do you like the best? I cannot pick one book that I like the best. Each one of them is like my own child. Each one of them has some great detail that makes me laugh every time I think about it." (Penguin Group, 2006). Children delight in this series, which is written in a humorous tone.

The title character of *Hooway for Wodney Wat*, cannot pronounce the letter *R*, so he cannot say many words properly, including his own name. When a very large rodent, Camilla, joins his class, she is bigger, meaner, and smarter than everyone else—until Rodney becomes the leader of the students' favorite game, Simon Says. When Rodney commands his classmates to do various tasks, all but Camilla know that Rodney's *weed* means *read*, *wake* means *rake*, and *west* means *rest*. Camilla makes a fool of herself, much to the delight of the other rodents. Although we generally do not recommend books that portray disabilities in animals because children may not relate to animals as well as they do to children, this tale is particularly delightful.

In *Kissing Doorknobs*, Tara describes how her increasingly strange compulsions started to take over her life when she was 11 years old. Her compulsions began when she heard others playing the sidewalk game, "Step on a crack, break your mother's back." Not only does she avoid stepping on the cracks, she begins to count the cracks between her house and school; and if something interrupts her or if she loses her count, she returns and starts over. Counting sidewalk cracks is the beginning of several compulsions that take over her life and interfere with her relationships with family and friends. The author well describes what obsessive-compulsive disorder feels like, as well as its effects on others.

Knots on a Counting Rope presents the story of a Native American grandfather and his blind grandson. They reminisce about the boy's turbulent birth and how he received his name, Boy-Strength-of-Blue-Horses. They also recall how he learned to ride a horse and participated in a memorable horse race. The grandfather teaches the young boy that he will always have to live in the dark but that there are many ways

Additional Resources

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Prater, M. A., Johnstun, M., & Munk, J. (2005). From Spaceman to The ADDed Touch: Using juvenile literature to teach about attention deficit disorder. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 1(4) Article 4. Available online at http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol1/iss4/art4/

Developmental Disabilities (including Autism, Developmental Delay, Intellectual Disabilities, and Multiple Disabilities)

Dyches, T. T., Prater, M. A. (2005). Characterization of developmental disabilities in children's fiction. *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities, 40*, 202–216.

Dyches, T. T., Prater, M. A., & Cramer, S. (2001). Mental retardation and autism in children's books. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, 36*, 230–243.

Prater, M. A. (1999). Characterization of mental retardation in children and young adult literature. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, 34*, 418–431.

Deafness/Hard of Hearing

Turner, N. D., & Traxler, M. (1997). Children's literature for the primary inclusive classroom: Increasing understanding of children with hearing impairments. *American Annals of the Deaf, 142*, 350–355.

Learning Disabilities

Prater, M. A. (2003). Learning disabilities in children's and adolescent literature: How are characters portrayed? *Learning Disability Quarterly, 26*, 47–62.

Various Disabilities

American Library Association, at http://www.ala.org/ala/awardsbucket/schneideraward/bibliography.htm

Dyches, T. T., Prater, M. A., & Jenson, J. (2006). Caldecott books and their portrayal of disabilities. *TEACHING Exceptional Children* Plus, 2(5) Article 2. Available online at http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol2/iss5/art2/

Hulen, L., Hoffbauer, D., & Prenn, M. (1998). Children's literature dealing with disabilities: A bibliography for the inclusive classroom. Journal of Children's Literature, 24(1), 67–77.

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities at http://www.nichcy.org/pubs/bibliog/bib5txt.htm

Penguin Group (USA). (2006). Q&A with Henry and Lin. In Hank Zipzer: The World's Greatest Underachiever. Retrieved January 8, 2008, from http://www.hankzipzer.com/qa.html

Prater, M. A. (2000). Using juvenile literature that portrays characters with disabilities in your classroom. Intervention in School and Clinic, 35, 167–176.

Prater, M. A., & Dyches, T. T. (2008). Teaching about disabilities through *children's literature*. Westport, CN: Libraries Unlimited.

to see. This exquisitely illustrated book emphasizes how individuals with disabilities can find strengths that more than compensate for their difficulties. The fact that the story takes place in a Native American culture adds to its appeal.

In *Life Magic*, Crystal struggles as a middle child with two gifted sisters. She becomes very close to her Uncle Joe, who moved in with her family when his health began to deteriorate because of AIDS. Uncle Joe shares with Crystal that he also had difficulties learning in school. When they make snow angels together, Crystal wants one without the footsteps in the snow, and Uncle Joe tells her that only a real angel can do that. In the end, Uncle Joe dies, and Crystal discovers a snow angel without footprints. Crystal's learning disabilities portrayed at the beginning of the book become secondary to Uncle Joe's health and subsequent death.

Lois Lowry's trilogy—consisting of *The Giver, Gathering Blue*, and *Messenger*—exposes readers to futuristic communities that mandate conformity and uniformity, that shun technology and preservation of history, that turn away immigrants, and that often "release" individuals with disabilities from society. However, the main characters with disabilities have a powerful influence for good. These characters include Kira, who has an orthopedic impairment, and the Seer, who is blind. Although the setting of these books is not the present, this trilogy provides an engaging foundation for discussing the definition, creation, and destruction of utopian societies, as well as the role of individuals with disabilities in such societies. *The Giver* received the Newbery Medal.

Select books appropriate for specific situations and individual students.

In *My Brother Sammy*, Sammy's brother tells the reader that Sammy is special because he goes to a different school on a different bus and learns in different ways. He also likes to play in different ways, like watching the sand fall between his fingers rather than building a sand castle. Sammy's brother expresses feelings typical of a sibling of a child with autism—sadness, embarrassment, loneliness, and frustration. At the end of the book, Sammy learns that he is Sammy's special brother, which helps him see life from a new perspective. The brightly colored watercolor illustrations are beautiful. This book won the Dolly Gray Award.

The Newbery Honor book *Rules* tells the story of 12-year-old Catherine, who reacts as a typical sibling of a brother with autism—vacillating between loving and helping David and then being embarrassed by and resentful of him. Catherine generates rules to help David and to apply to her own life. When taking David to the clinic, she meets and befriends Jason, a nonverbal boy who uses a wheelchair. Catherine uses her artistic talents to add many pictures to Jason's communication book and begins to develop a strong friendship with him. However, she does not want her peers to know about their friendship. In the end, Jason helps Catherine see that her rules may really be excuses, and she begins to look at life differently.

In *See the Ocean*, Nellie is a young girl who is blind; however, her blindness is not evident until the end of the story. The fog is thick when Nellie and her family approach the ocean on their annual visit to the beach; and for the first time, Nellie can "see" the ocean with her other senses before her brothers see it with their eyes. Nellie's blindness does not prevent her from feeding crumbs to the seagulls, throwing pebbles into ponds, and enjoying the feeling of seashells and driftwood. The beautiful oil paintings that illustrate this book hide Nellie's eyes under her hat.

In *So B. It*, which has received the Dolly Gray Award, the character with a disability is 12-year-old Heidi's mother, who has intellectual disabilities and a very limited vocabulary. Heidi and her mother live alone in an apartment but rely heavily on their next-door neighbor, Bernadette, who has agoraphobia. In an attempt to discover her personal and family history, Heidi ventures from their home in Reno, Nevada, to Liberty, New York, discovering who she is and better understanding her mother as well. This book is noteworthy, particularly because it portrays how those with significant intellectual disabilities have the capacity and desire to love and be loved.

Trisha, in the autobiographical book, *Thank You, Mr. Falker*, cannot wait to start school so that she can learn to read. By first grade, however, she becomes frustrated with how easy reading seems for everyone but herself. Trisha begins to feel different and stupid. After her family relocates across the country, Trisha finds that her new school is the same as the previous one, and the other students tease her incessantly. Finally, Mr. Falker, her fifth-grade teacher, recognizes that Trisha cannot read. He and the reading teacher tutor her after school until she learns to read. After 30 years have passed, Trisha sees Mr. Falker again and thanks him for changing her life.

Tru Confessions, tells the story of 12-year-old Tru, who has two primary ambitions in life: to produce her own television show and to cure her twin brother of his intellectual disability. Tru seems tormented that her brother has a disability although she does not. Eventually, Tru realizes that she does not need to cure her brother and that she can move on with her own life. This book is unique in that it intersperses Tru's electronic diary within the text, which makes the book particularly enjoyable to read. This book has won the Dolly Gray Award and was made into a Disney Channel movie.

Mrs. Olinski, who uses a wheelchair in *The View from Saturday*, returns to teaching 10 years after a car accident has paralyzed her. She selects a group of four brilliant, but shy and unlikely, teammates to be her sixth-grade academic bowl team. She does not know why she has selected these four classmates, nor does she understand their repeated success at beating older, more experienced competitors until she, like the reader, learns the story of each member and what draws them together. This book is a good example of including a character with a disability without emphasizing the character's limitations or disabilities. Mrs. Olinski's disability is not a focal point of the story, although it does affect the story line in minor ways. This book won the Newbery Medal Award.

In another Newbery Medal book, *The Westing Game*, the tenants of a new condominium building learn that they are heirs to the estate of Sam Westing. His will states that his murderer is among the heirs. In teams of two, they must use clues to identify the murderer, with the winning team inheriting the Westing fortune. One of the potential heirs is Chris, an adolescent boy who uses a wheelchair. Although the author does not present detailed information about Chris and his condition, it is refreshing to read a very clever and well-written book that integrates a character in a wheelchair without focusing on his disability.

The title character of *Yours Turly, Shirley* compensates for her learning disabilities by being the class clown. When her parents adopt Jackie, a young Vietnamese girl, Shirley helps her learn English and a new culture, including learning about Barbie and Santa Claus. Helping Jackie makes Shirley feel important. Jackie turns into an excellent student who is a wonderful reader, speller, and memorizer and whose schoolwork is far better than Shirley's schoolwork. Now school is not the only thing that Shirley dislikes. The characters in this book are enchanting and lovable. The book is a fast read with a cute and entertaining story that shows how some people use humor to cover up their weaknesses.

Final Thoughts

Parents, teachers, librarians, psychologists, social workers, and others can use books from this top 25 list to share with children the joy of reading exemplary books that include multidimensional characters with disabilities. Given that literary merit alone will not ensure that you have chosen "the right book for the right reader for the right situation" (Kurkjian & Livingston, 2005, p. 790), the books on this list should help you select books appropriate for specific situations and individual students.

References

American Library Association (ALA). (2007). *Awards and scholarships*. Retrieved January 2, 2008, from http://www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=bookmediaawards&template=/ContentManagement

Council for Exceptional Children, Division of Developmental Disabilities. (n.d.). Dolly Gray Award for children's literature in developmental disabilities. Retrieved January 2, 2008, from www.dddcec. org/secondarypages/dollygray/Dolly_Gray_Children%27s_Literature_Award.html

Dyches, T. T., & Prater, M. A. (2000). *Developmental disability in children's literature: Issues and annotated bibliography*. Reston, VA: The Division on Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities of the Council for Exceptional Children.

Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), 20 U.S.C. §1400 *et seq.* (2004; reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990).

Kurkjian, C., & Livingston, N. (2005). The right book for the right child for the right situation. *The Reading Teacher, 58*, 786–795.

Tunnell, M. O., & Jacobs, J. S. (2007). *Children's literature, briefly*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Wallechinsky, D., & Wallace, A. (2005). *The new book of lists: The original compendium of curious information*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Canongate.

Mary Anne Prater (CEC UT Federation), Professor and Chair; and **Tina Taylor Dyches** (CEC UT Federation), Associate Professor, Counseling Psychology and Special Education, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

Address correspondence to Mary Anne Prater, Counseling Psychology and Special Education, Brigham Young University, 340 MCKB, Provo, UT, 84602 (e-mail: prater@byu.edu).

From *Teaching Exceptional Children*, March/April 2008, pp. 32–38. Copyright © 2008 by Council for Exceptional Children. Reprinted by permission.

Learning in an Inclusive Community

Inclusive classrooms create students who are comfortable with differences, skilled at confronting challenging issues, and aware of their interconnectedness.

MARA SAPON-SHEVIN

Schools are increasingly acknowledging the heterogeneity of their student populations and the need to respond thoughtfully and responsibly to differences in the classroom. It's understandable that educators often feel overwhelmed by growing demands for inclusion, multi-cultural education, multiple intelligences, and differentiated instruction to deal with the growing diversity.

But what if including all students and attending thoughtfully to diversity were part of the solution rather than part of the task overload? What if we put community building and the emotional climate of the classroom back at the center of our organizing values? What if we realized that only inclusive classrooms can fully support the goal of creating thoughtful, engaged citizens for our democratic society?

Redefining the Inclusive Classroom

After years of struggle about the politics and practice of inclusion and multicultural education, it's time we understand that inclusive, diverse classrooms are here to stay. But inclusion is not about disability, and it's not only about schools. Inclusion is about creating a society in which all children and their families feel welcomed and valued.

Inclusion is about creating a society in which all children and their families feel welcomed and valued.

In truly inclusive classrooms, teachers acknowledge the myriad ways in which students differ from one another (class, gender, ethnicity, family background, sexual orientation, language, abilities, size, religion, and so on); value this diversity; and design and implement productive, sensitive responses. Defining inclusion in this way requires us to redefine other classroom practices. For example, *access* can mean, Is there a ramp? But it can also mean, Will letters home to parents be written in a language they can understand?

Differentiated instruction can mean allowing a nonreader to listen to a book on tape. But it can also mean organizing the language arts curriculum using principles of universal design, assuming and planning for diversity from the beginning rather than retrofitting accommodations after the initial design.

Positive behavior management can be a system of providing support to students with diagnosed emotional problems. But it can also mean ongoing community building, classroom meetings, cooperative games, and a culture of appreciation and celebration for all students.

What does it mean to think inclusively, and how can this framework enhance the learning of all children? There are many lessons that inclusive education settings can teach us. Here are just a few.

Comfort with Diversity

In our increasingly diverse world, all people need to be comfortable with diversity. Inclusion benefits all students by helping them understand and appreciate that the world is big, that people are different, and that we can work together to find solutions that work for everyone.

Inclusion teaches us to think about *we* rather than *I*—not to ask, Will there be anything for me to eat? but rather to wonder, How can we make sure there's a snack for everyone? Not, Will I have friends? but rather, How can I be aware of the children here who don't have anyone to play with? When we are surrounded by people who are different from us, we are forced to ask questions that go beyond the individual and address the community. When we have friends who use wheel-chairs, we notice that there are steep stairs and no ramps. When we have friends who wear hearing aids, we listen differently to comments like "What are you, deaf or something?" When we have friends with different skin colors, we become more alert to racist and exclusionary comments. When we have friends from different religious backgrounds, we are more aware that the decorations in the mall are about only one religion.

Inclusion teaches us to think about *we* rather than *I*.

In the absence of diversity, it's hard to learn to be comfortable with difference. The white college-age students I teach are often confounded about how to talk about people of color: "Is the right term *African American* or *black?* What if the person is from Jamaica or Haiti? How do I describe people?" Similarly, many adults are nervous about interacting with people with disabilities, unsure whether they should offer help or refrain, mention the person's disability or not.

The only way to gain fluency, comfort, and ease is through genuine relationships in which we learn how to talk to and about people whom we perceive as different, often learning that many of our initial assumptions or judgments were, in fact, erroneous. The goal is not to make differences invisible ("I don't see color"; "It's such a good inclusive classroom, you can't tell who the kids with disabilities are") but to develop the language and skill to negotiate diversity. Classrooms cannot feel safe to anyone if discussions of difference are avoided, discouraged, or considered inappropriate.

I am always delighted, and a bit stunned, when I see young people easily negotiating conversations about difference that would have been impossible a decade ago and that are still out of reach for many of us. I recently witnessed a discussion of different kinds of families during which children from ages 5 to 8 spoke of adoption, same-sex parents, known and unknown donors, and the many ways they had come to be members of their family. These students, growing up in an inclusive, diverse community, will not need a book that says, "There are many kinds of families." That understanding is already part of their lived experience.

As a teacher, you can successfully facilitate discussions like this by doing the following:

- Familiarize yourself with the current terminology and debates about what people are called: Do Puerto Ricans call themselves *Latino?* Why is the term *hearing impaired* preferred by some but not all "deaf" people? If there are disagreements about terms—for example, some people prefer the term *Native American* and *some Indian*—find out what that conversation is about. Model appropriate language when discussing differences in the classroom.
- Provide multiple opportunities for talking about diversity. When a news story is about a hurricane in Haiti, pull down the map: Where is that country? What languages do the people there speak? Do we have anyone at our school from Haiti?
- If you hear teasing or inappropriate language being used to discuss differences, don't respond punitively ("I don't ever want to hear that word again!"), but don't let it go. As soon as possible, engage students in a discussion of the power of their language and their assumptions. Teach students the words *stereotype, prejudice,* and *discrimination* and encourage them to identify examples when they see them: "On the commercial on TV last night, I noticed that all the people they identified as 'beautiful' were white."

Inclusion is not a favor we do for students with disabilities, any more than a commitment to multicultural education benefits only students of color. Inclusion is a gift we give ourselves: the gift of understanding, the gift of knowing that we are all members of the human race and that joy comes in building genuine relationships with a wide range of other people.

Honesty about Hard Topics

Inclusion not only makes students better educated about individual differences, but also provides a place to learn about challenging topics. In inclusive classrooms, teachers and students learn to talk about the uncomfortable and the painful.

Often, as adults, we don't know what to do when we are confronted by people and situations that frighten, surprise, or confound us. Children, through their eagerness to engage with the world and seek answers to their questions, can learn important repertoires of communication and interaction in inclusive settings: How can I find out why Michelle wears that scarf on her head without hurting her feelings? How can I play with Jasper if he doesn't talk? Learning how to ask questions respectfully and how to listen well to the answers are skills that will provide a smoother entry into the complexities of adulthood.

In one school, a young boy who required tube feeding provided the opportunity for all the students to learn not only about the digestive system but also about ways to help people while preserving their dignity and autonomy. In another school, a child whose religion kept him from celebrating birthdays and holidays gave other students the opportunity to not only learn about different religions but also brainstorm ways of keeping Jonah a valued and supported member of the classroom. And when a young Muslim child was harassed on the way home from school in the months after the attack on the World Trade Center, the whole class was able to engage in an important discussion of racism and being allies to those experiencing prejudice and oppression.

A student in one classroom was dying of cancer. The teachers, rather than excluding the student and avoiding the subsequent questions, helped all the other students stay informed and involved in his life (and eventually, in his death). With close communication with parents, the teachers talked to students about what was happening to Trevor and how they could support him: "Of course we would miss you if you died." "Yes, it's very, very sad." "No, it's not fair for a 6-year-old to die; it doesn't happen very often." On days when Trevor was in school and feeling weak, the students took turns reading to him. On days when he was not able to come to school, they wrote him notes and made cards. When he died, many of them went to the funeral. Tears were welcomed and tissues were widely used; the teachers were able to show their sadness as well. Teachers had to be thoughtful about discussions of religious beliefs in order to be inclusive: "Yes, some people believe in heaven, and they think that's where Trevor is going."

Although no parents would want their children to have to deal with the death of a classmate, the sensitivity and tenderness of the experience helped bond the class and enabled students to connect to both the fragility and the sacredness of life. When they experience death again later in their lives, they will have some understanding of what it means to offer and receive support and will be able to seek the information and caring they need for their own journeys.

Ten Strategies for Creating a Positive, Inclusive Classroom

1. Make time for community building throughout the year. Time spent building community is never wasted.
2. Proactively teach positive social skills: how to make friends, how to give compliments, what to do if someone teases you or hurts your feelings. Don't wait for negative things to happen.
3. Be explicit in explaining to your students why treating one another well and building a community is important. Use key terms: *community, inclusion, friends, support, caring, kindness*. Don't let those words become empty slogans; give lots of examples of positive behaviors.
4. Adopt a zero-indifference policy. Don't ignore bullying in the hope that it will go away. Don't punish the participants, but be clear about what is acceptable. Say, "I don't want that word used in my classroom. It hurts people's feelings and it's not kind."
5. Share your own learning around issues of diversity and inclusion. When students see that you are also learning (and struggling), they can share their own journeys more easily. Tell them, "You know, when I was growing up, there were some words I heard and used that I don't use anymore, and here's why." "You know, sometimes I'm still a little uncomfortable when I see people with significant physical differences, but here's what I've been learning."
6. Think about what messages you're communicating about community and differences in everything you do, including the books you read to your students, the songs you sing, what you put on the walls, and how you talk about different families and world events.
7. Seize teachable moments for social justice. When students say, "That's so gay," talk about the power of words to hurt people and where such oppressive language can lead. When a student makes fun of another student, talk about different cultures, norms, and experiences.
8. Provide lots of opportunities for students to work together, and teach them how to help one another. End activities with appreciation circles: "What's something you did well today?" "How did Carlos help you today?"
9. Don't set students up to compete with one another. Create an atmosphere in which each student knows that he or she is valued for something.
10. Keep in mind that your students will remember only some of what you taught them but everything about how they felt in your classroom.

In inclusive classrooms, I have seen students learn to support a classmate with cerebral palsy, become allies in the face of homophobic bullying, and help a peer struggling with academic work. All of these were possible because the teachers were willing and able to talk to the students honestly about what was going on, creating a caring, supportive community for all students rather than marginalizing those who were experiencing difficulty.

Mutual Support

Sadly, teasing and exclusion are a typical part of many students' school experience. Bullying is so common that it can become virtually invisible. But inclusive classrooms foster a climate in which individual students know they will not be abandoned when they experience injustice. Inclusion means that we pay careful attention to issues of social justice and inequity, whether they appear at the individual, classroom, or school level or extend into the larger community.

I have used Peggy Moss's wonderful children's book *Say Something* (Tilbury House, 2004) to engage students and teachers in discussions about what we do when we see someone being picked on. In the book, a young girl goes from witnessing and lamenting the mistreatment of her classmates to taking action to change the patterns she observes.

This book and similar materials encourage students to talk about the concept of courage, about opportunities to be brave in both small and large ways, and about how they can make a difference.

Inclusive classrooms give us many opportunities to be our best selves, reaching across our personal borders to ask, Do you want to play? or Can I help you with that? Our lessons about how we treat one another extend beyond the specificity of rules (Don't tease children with disabilities) to broader, more inclusive discussions: How would you like to be treated? What do you think others feel when they're left out? How could we change this activity so more kids could play? How do you want others to deal with your challenges and triumphs, and what would that look like in our classroom?

Teachers in inclusive classrooms consider helping essential. The classroom becomes a more positive place for everyone when multiple forms of peer support—such as peer mentoring and collaborative learning—are ongoing, consistent, and valued. Rather than saying, "I want to know what you can do, not what your neighbor can do," inclusive teachers say, "Molly, why don't you ask Luis to show you how to do that," or "Make sure everyone at your table understands how to color the map code."

Inclusive settings provide multiple opportunities to explore what it means to help one another. By challenging the notion that there are two kinds of people in the world—those who need help and those who give help—we teach all students to see themselves as both givers and receivers. We recognize and honor multiple forms of intelligence and many gifts.

Courage to Change the World

When students develop fluency in addressing differences, are exposed to challenging issues, and view themselves as interconnected, teachers can more easily engage them in discussions about how to improve things.

Having a personal connection profoundly shifts one's perception about who has the problem and who should do something about it. When students have a classmate who comes from Mexico and is undocumented, discussions of immigration rights, border patrols, and fair employment practices become much more real. When students have learned to communicate with a classmate with autism, they understand at a deep level that being unable to talk is not the same as having nothing to say. When a classmate comes from a family with two mothers, reports of gay bashing or debates about marriage rights become more tangible.

A powerful way to combat political apathy is by helping young people make connections between their lives and those of others and giving them opportunities to make a difference in whatever ways they can. Although it's certainly possible to teach a social-justice curriculum in a fairly homogeneous school, inclusive classrooms give us the opportunity to put social-justice principles into action. In inclusive classrooms, students can *live* a social-justice curriculum rather than just study it.

A powerful way to combat political apathy is by helping young people make connections between their lives and those of others.

Inclusive classrooms that pay careful attention to issues of fairness and justice bring to the surface questions that have the potential to shift students' consciousness now and in the future: Who gets into the gifted program, and how are they chosen? How can we find a part in the school play for a classmate who doesn't talk? Why do people make fun of Brian because he likes art and doesn't like sports? How can we make sure everyone gets to go on the field trip that costs $20?

Inclusive classrooms put a premium on how people treat one another. Learning to live together in a democratic society is one of the most important goals and outcomes of inclusive classrooms. How could we want anything less for our children?

Mara Sapon-Shevin is Professor of Inclusive Education, Syracuse University, New York; msaponsh@syr.edu. She is the author of *Widening the Circle: The Power of Inclusive Classrooms* (Beacon Press, 2007).

From *Educational Leadership*, September 2008, pp. 49–53. Copyright © 2008 by Mara Sapon-Shevin. Reprinted by permission of the author.

Overview of Special Education Law

The basics on the Individualized Education Program (IEP) and children's rights to special education.

Special education laws give children with disabilities and their parents important rights not available to children in regular education. Specifically, the federal Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) gives families of special education children the right to:

- have their child assessed or tested to determine their special education eligibility and needs
- inspect and review school records relating to their child
- attend an annual "Individualized Education Program" (IEP) meeting and develop a written IEP plan with representatives of the local school district, and
- resolve disputes with the school district through an impartial administrative and legal process.

Eligibility Under IDEA

Every school district is legally required to identify, locate and evaluate children with disabilities (20 U.S.C. §1412(a)(3)). After the evaluation, a disabled child may be provided with specific programs and services to address his or her special needs.

IDEA defines "children with disabilities" as individuals between the ages of three and 22 with one or more of the following conditions (20 U.S.C. §1401(3)(26); 34 C.F.R. §300.7):

- mental retardation
- hearing impairment (including deafness)
- speech or language impairment
- visual impairment (including blindness)
- serious emotional disturbance
- orthopedic impairment
- autism
- traumatic brain injury
- specific learning disability, or
- other health impairment.

For your child to qualify for special education under IDEA, it is not enough that he has one of these disabilities. There must also be evidence that your child's disability adversely affects his educational performance.

Once a child is found eligible for special education, subsequent evaluations take place at least every three years. If you are not satisfied with the initial evaluation or you feel your child's disability or special education needs have changed, your child is entitled to more frequent assessments if you so request, and even outside or independent assessments (20 U.S.C. §1414; 34 C.F.R. §§300.530-543).

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Special education centers on a process for evaluating your child and the development and provision of an individualized education program, or IEP, that meets your child's unique needs. The acronym IEP refers to several inter-related things:

- an initial meeting where the school district determines whether or not your child is eligible for special education

- a yearly meeting where you and school representatives develop your child's educational plan, and
- a detailed written description of your child's educational program.

Every written IEP document must include the same information, although forms will vary from one school district to another.

1. Current Educational Status

The IEP must include a description of your child's current status in school in the areas of cognitive skills, linguistic ability, emotional behavior, social skills and behavior and physical ability (20 U.S.C. §1414(d)(1)(A)(i)(I)). Current functioning may be reflected in testing data, grades, reports or anecdotal information, such as teacher observations. IDEA calls this the "present level of educational performance," and this part of the IEP must describe how your child's disability affects her involvement and progress in the general curriculum. Formal testing or assessments of your child will provide a good deal of information.

2. Goals and Objectives

Goals and objectives are the nuts and bolts of your child's daily program as detailed in the IEP, and generally refer to academic, linguistic and other cognitive activities, such as reading or math. IDEA specifically calls these "measurable annual goals, including benchmarks or short-term objectives" related to your child's specific educational needs and involvement in, if appropriate, the general curriculum (20 U.S.C. §1414(d)(1)(A)(ii)).

While the goals and objectives are usually academic and cognitive in nature, there is no restriction on what they may cover. They should reflect whatever the IEP team determines is important to your child's education. Goals and objectives can relate to physical education, how your child socializes with peers, even how your child will move about the school.

Whether your child is receiving a "free appropriate public education," as required by the IDEA, may depend on whether the program offered by the school district can help her achieve her goals and objectives. If you and the school district disagree about a specific placement or service, one key issue will be whether your child's goals and objectives can be met without it.

3. Instructional Setting or Placement

The IEP must include information about the instructional setting or placement for your child. At the core of IDEA is the requirement that children with disabilities be placed in the "least restrictive environment" (LRE), commonly referred to as mainstreaming. While IDEA expresses a preference for regular education, it recognizes that some children with disabilities should not be in a regular class. Individual need determines the appropriateness of a placement. If regular classroom placement is not appropriate, IDEA requires that the school district provide a range of alternative placements, including the following:

- regular classes for part of the school day
- special classes in regular schools-for example, a special class for children with learning disabilities
- special public or private schools for children with significant difficulties, such as a school for emotionally troubled students
- residential programs
- home instruction, and

- hospital and institutional placement.

The IEP must specifically include related services -- developmental, corrective and other supportive services, such as speech therapy, transportation or counseling services -- necessary to facilitate your child's placement in a regular classroom or to allow your child to benefit from special education.

4. Optional Components

The IEP may include other components, such as specific teaching methods or class subjects, or anything else the IEP team agrees should be included (20 U.S.C. §1414(d)(1)(A)).

5. Transition Services

IDEA requires that the IEP team consider, for a child who is 14 or older, her vocational and advanced-placement needs and courses, and any involvement with noneducational agencies that provide vocational and other support services for individuals with disabilities (20 U.S.C. §1414(d)(1) (A)(vii); 34 C.F.R. §300.347(b)).

6. Due Process

Due process refers to your specific right to take any dispute you have with your child's school district -- whether a disagreement about an assessment, eligibility or any part of the IEP, including the specific placement and related services -- to a neutral third party to help you resolve your dispute. These rights are unique; parents of children who are not in special education do not have them (20 U.S.C. §1415; 34 C.F.R. §§300.500-517).

If you have a disagreement, you can go to mediation and a due process or "fair hearing." Mediation is the process where you and the school district meet with a neutral third party who helps you come to an agreement. The mediator has the power of persuasion, but no authority to impose a decision on you. If you cannot reach an agreement in mediation (or prefer to skip mediation altogether), you can request a fair hearing, in which you and the school district present written and oral testimony about the disputed issues before a neutral administrative judge, who will decide who is right and issue an order imposing a decision. If you or the school district disagree with the decision, you can appeal to a federal or state court, all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court if necessary.

More Information: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

For more information on IDEA and special education law, contact the following organizations:

Your local school district. The district is required by the IDEA to provide you with a copy of federal and state statutes and regulations and any relevant policies. Be sure to request this information, along with the school district's IEP form and any parent guide that's available.U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS). For information on the IDEA and special education law, visit OSERS at http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS. Your state department of education. The federal IDEA is binding on all states. The federal government provides financial assistance to the states, which are responsible for making sure the local school districts comply with the IDEA. Most states have laws that generally parallel IDEA. States can provide children with more, not fewer, protections than IDEA does. For more information on state special education laws and regulations, contact your state department of education. Your school district can give you the appropriate office to contact.

KidsHealth
from Nemours

KidsHealth.org

The most-visited site
devoted to children's
health and development

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)

What's an IEP?

Kids with delayed skills or other disabilities might be eligible for special services that provide individualized education programs in public schools, free of charge to families. Understanding how to access these services can help parents be effective advocates for their kids.

The passage of the updated version of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) made parents of kids with special needs even more crucial members of their child's education team.

Parents can now work with educators to develop a plan — the individualized education program (IEP) — to help kids succeed in school. The IEP describes the goals the team sets for a child during the school year, as well as any special support needed to help achieve them.

Who Needs an IEP?

A child who has difficulty learning and functioning and has been identified as a special needs student is the perfect candidate for an IEP.

Kids struggling in school may qualify for support services, allowing them to be taught in a special way, for reasons such as:

- learning disabilities
- attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- emotional disorders
- cognitive challenges
- autism
- hearing impairment
- visual impairment
- speech or language impairment
- developmental delay
- physical disabilities

How Are Services Delivered?

In most cases, the services and goals outlined in an IEP can be provided in a standard school environment. This can be done in the regular classroom (for example, a reading teacher helping a small group of children who need extra assistance while the other kids in the class work on reading with the regular teacher) or in a special resource room in the regular school. The resource room can serve a group of kids with similar needs who are brought together for help.

However, kids who need intense intervention may be taught in a special school environment. These classes have fewer students per teacher, allowing for more individualized attention.

In addition, the teacher usually has specific training in helping kids with special educational needs. The children spend most of their day in a special classroom and join the regular classes for nonacademic activities (like music and gym) or in academic activities in which they don't need extra help.

Because the goal of IDEA is to ensure that each child is educated in the least restrictive environment possible, effort is made to help kids stay in a regular classroom. However, when needs are best met in a special class, then kids might be placed in one.

The Referral and Evaluation Process

The referral process generally begins when a teacher, parent, or doctor is concerned that a child may be having trouble in the classroom, and the teacher notifies the school counselor or psychologist.

The first step is to gather specific data regarding the student's progress or academic problems. This may be done through:

- a conference with parents
- a conference with the student
- observation of the student
- analysis of the student's performance (attention, behavior, work completion, tests, classwork, homework, etc.)

This information helps school personnel determine the next step. At this point, strategies specific to the student could be used to help the child become more successful in school. If this doesn't work, the child would be tested for a specific learning disability or other impairment to help determine qualification for special services.

It's important to note, though, that the presence of a disability doesn't automatically guarantee a child will receive services. To be eligible, the disability must affect functioning at school.

To determine eligibility, a multidisciplinary team of professionals will evaluate the child based on their observations; the child's performance on standardized tests; and daily work such as tests, quizzes, classwork, and homework.

Who's On the Team?

The professionals on the evaluation team can include:

- a psychologist
- a physical therapist
- an occupational therapist
- a speech therapist
- a special educator
- a vision or hearing specialist
- others, depending on the child's specific needs

As a parent, you can decide whether to have your child assessed. If you choose to do so, you'll be asked to sign a permission form that will detail who is involved in the process and the types of tests they use. These tests might include measures of specific school skills, such as reading or math, as well as more general developmental skills, such as speech and language. Testing does not necessarily mean that a child will receive services.

Once the team members complete their individual assessments, they develop a comprehensive evaluation report (CER) that compiles their findings, offers an educational classification, and outlines the skills and support the child will need.

The parents then have a chance to review the report before the IEP is developed. Some parents will disagree with the report, and they will have the opportunity to work together with the school to come up with a plan that best meets the child's needs.

Developing an IEP

The next step is an IEP meeting at which the team and parents decide what will go into the plan. In addition to the evaluation team, a regular teacher should be present to offer suggestions about how the plan can help the child's progress in the standard education curriculum.

At the meeting, the team will discuss your child's educational needs — as described in the CER — and come up with specific, measurable short-term and annual goals for each of those needs. If you attend this meeting, you can take an active role in developing the goals and determining which skills or areas will receive the most attention.

The cover page of the IEP outlines the support services your child will receive and how often they will be provided (for example, occupational therapy twice a week). Support services might include special education, speech therapy, occupational or physical therapy, counseling, audiology, medical services, nursing, and vision or hearing therapy. They might also include transportation; the extent of participation in programs for students without disabilities; what, if any, modifications are needed in the administration of statewide assessment of student achievement; and, beginning at age 14, the inclusion of transition planning as a part of the process.

If the team recommends several services, the amount of time they take in the child's school schedule can seem overwhelming. To ease that load, some services may be provided on a consultative basis. In these cases, the professional consults with the teacher to come up with strategies to help the child but doesn't offer any hands-on instruction. For instance, an occupational therapist may suggest accommodations for a child with fine-motor problems that affect handwriting, and the classroom teacher would incorporate these suggestions into the handwriting lessons taught to the entire class.

Other services can be delivered right in the classroom, so the child's day isn't interrupted by therapy. The child who has difficulty with handwriting might work one on one with an occupational therapist while everyone else practices their handwriting skills. When deciding how and where services are offered, the child's comfort and dignity should be a top priority.

The IEP should be reviewed annually to update the goals and make sure the levels of service meet your child's needs. However, IEPs can be changed at any time on an as-needed basis. If you think your child needs more, fewer, or different services, you can request a meeting and bring the team together to discuss your concerns.

Your Legal Rights

Specific timelines ensure that the development of an IEP moves from referral to providing services as quickly as possible. Be sure to ask about this timeframe and get a copy of your parents' rights when your child is referred. These guidelines (sometimes called procedural safeguards) outline your rights as a parent to control what happens to your child during each step of the process.

The parents' rights also describe how you can proceed if you disagree with any part of the CER or the IEP — mediation and hearings both are options. You can get information about low-cost or free legal representation from the school district or, if your child is in Early Intervention (for kids up to age 3), through that program.

Attorneys and paid advocates familiar with the IEP process will provide representation if you need it. You also may invite anyone who knows or works with your child whose input you feel would be helpful to join the IEP team. Federally supported programs in each state support parent-to-parent information and training activities for parents of children with special needs. The Parent Training and Information Projects conduct workshops, publish newsletters, and answer questions by phone or by mail about parent-to-parent activities.

A Final Word

Parents have the right to choose where their kids will be educated. This choice includes public or private elementary schools and secondary schools, including religious schools. It also includes charter schools and home schools.

However, it is important to understand that the rights of children with disabilities who are placed by their parents in private elementary schools and secondary schools are not the same as those of kids with disabilities who are enrolled in public schools or placed by public agencies in private schools when the public school is unable to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE).

Two major differences that parents, teachers, other school staff, private school representatives, and the kids need to know about are:

1. Children with disabilities who are placed by their parents in private schools may not get the same services they would receive in a public school.
2. Not all kids with disabilities placed by their parents in private schools will receive services.

The IEP process is complex, but it's also an effective way to address how your child learns and functions. If you have concerns, don't hesitate to ask questions about the evaluation findings or the goals recommended by the team. You know your child best and should play a central role in creating a learning plan tailored to his or her specific needs.

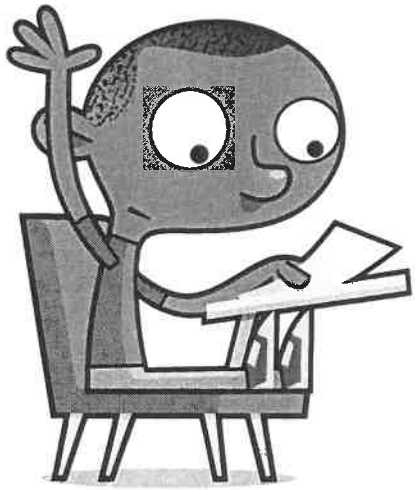
Reviewed by: Steven J. Bachrach, MD
Date reviewed: September 2016

Images provided by The Nemours Foundation, iStock, Getty Images, Veer, Shutterstock, and Clipart.com

Handy Handouts®
Free, educational handouts for teachers and parents*
Number 308

What Is a 504 Plan?

by Rynette R. Kjesbo, M.S., CCC-SLP



A *504 Plan* is a special plan for a student who has a disability but does not qualify for an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The number "504" refers to *Section 504* of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This federal law protects students with disabilities. It states that a student with a disability cannot be excluded from any programs or activities that receive federal funding. Section 504 ensures that students who have disabilities have equal access to education as do their peers who do not have disabilities.

A 504 Plan identifies *accommodations* and *modifications* a student with a disability may need in order to participate in programs and activities. Accommodations and modifications on a 504 Plan may include (but are not limited to) special seating assignments (for example, near the door, near the bathroom, or near the teacher), additional time to complete tests or assignments, or using a recorder to record lessons.

How Does a Student Qualify for a 504 Plan?

According to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2011), for eligibility under Section 504, "a student must be determined to: (1) have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; or (2) have a record of such an impairment; or (3) be regarded as having such an impairment." If a student meets these qualifications, the parents/caregivers and the educational team need to determine if the effect of the student's impairment is so significant that accommodations and/or modifications are necessary for the student to be able to *access* programs and activities.

How Is a 504 Plan Different From an Individualized Education Program (IEP)?

If a student has a disability that requires him/her to receive *specialized instruction* (instruction that is *different* from that of his/her peers who do not have disabilities), the student is eligible for an Individualized Education Program (IEP). In order to be eligible for an IEP, a student's disability must fall under one of the categories specified by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), there must be an evaluation which shows that the student's disability interferes with his/her ability to learn the educational material that is taught to all students, and there is evidence that the student requires special education services.

It is possible for a student to have a disability and not qualify for special education services and an IEP because he/she does not need *different instruction*. If a student is not eligible to receive an IEP, he/she may be eligible for a 504 Plan if he/she *needs* accommodations or modifications in order to have an *equal opportunity* to perform at the level of his/her peers. For more information about the eligibility criteria for IEPs or 504 Plans, contact your child's school.

Resource

U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. (2011). *Frequently asked questions about section 504 and the education of children with disabilities.* Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html

For more Handy Handouts®, go to www.handyhandouts.com.

Helpful Products

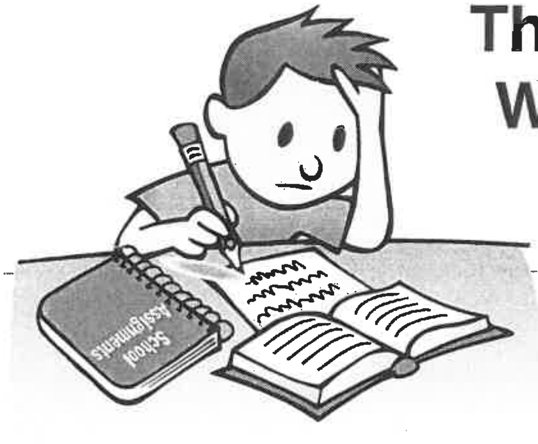
The list of Super Duper® products below may be helpful when working with children who have special needs. Visit www.superduperinc.com and type in the item name or number in our search engine. Click the links below to see the product descriptions.

Webber® HearBuilder® Following Directions – Professional Edition
Item #HBPE-133

Making a Difference for America's Children (Second Edition)
Item #TP-29703

Webber® Functional Communication Photo Lotto at School
Item #GB-360

Contextualized Language Intervention
Item #TPX-29801



The ABCs of the IEP Meeting: What a Parent Should Know

by Audrey Prince, M. Ed.

The IEP meeting is the first step to building a positive relationship with your child's teachers. As a parent, it is your opportunity to meet with the school staff and discuss your child's past and future performance in school.

What is an IEP?

IEP stands for *Individualized Education Program.* Students that have an IEP are or will be receiving special education services. The IEP is a written document that gives information about how the student is currently doing in school, what the school will do to help the student, and what services the school will provide for the student. Every child receiving special education services MUST have an IEP (it's the Law).

What is an IEP meeting?

The IEP meeting helps the special education teacher, regular education teacher, parent, and school representative agree on ways to help your child achieve success. You will be part of a team that will help to decide where and how your child will receive the help that he/she needs to be successful at school. The team will also decide on services for your child (for example, speech therapy, occupational therapy).

Is it important that I attend the meetings?

Yes! Parental involvement is the key to your child's success at school. The information that you can provide at these meetings is very important to achieving your child's educational goals in school and at home.

What will be discussed in the meeting?

If this is your first IEP meeting, expect to hear the results of tests, classroom performance, and behavior. Be prepared to hear about your child's strengths and his/her weaknesses. The school staff will have recommendations for how they can help your child in his/her areas of weakness as well as how the team can best promote your child's strengths.

What should I do before the meeting?

- If you cannot attend the meeting, call the school and ask to reschedule.
- Write down questions that you have for the IEP team, as well as goals that you have for your child. This way you will not forget anything when you get to the meeting.
- You are entitled to receive a copy of the proposed IEP documents prior to the meeting. Contact your child's special education teacher if you would like to obtain a copy.
- Talk with your child about school and his/her desires for the future.

What should I do during the meeting?

- Be an active team member provide any information that you believe would help your child at school and home.
- Ask Questions! Something you don't understand, ask to have it explained.
- Take notes. If both parents can attend or you can bring a friend or relative, have them take notes while you participate in the meeting. Remember, you will receive a lot of information at this meeting and it can be a little overwhelming. It will help if you have notes that you can review when you get home.
- Remember, if you do not agree with the program, speak up and voice your concerns.
- At the end of the meeting, you should receive a copy of your child's IEP.

What should I do after the IEP meeting?

- File the Individualized Education Program (IEP) papers in one place.
- Review the IEP throughout the year; make sure that the program is continuing to meet the needs of your child.
- Continue the program at home. For example, if your child is learning to say the "r" sound in speech therapy, it is important that you continue practicing at home.
- Help your child focus on abilities and progress, not grades.
- Find activites that showcase your child's strengths to help develop confidence.

Name ______________________

Date ______________________