

***Promoting Academic and
Socioemotional Growth Among
Exceptional Learners***

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Center for Children and Families

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Who Are “Exceptional Learners”?

Exceptional learners...

- Often refer to students with disabilities
- Include children who experience difficulties in learning *AND* students whose abilities are very advanced
- Is an inclusive term that refers to children with
 - Learning and/or behavioral problems
 - Children with physical disabilities, sensory impairments
 - Children with superior intelligence and/or special talents
- Necessitate *exceptional* professional practices, instructional methods, and curricular considerations

Who Are “Exceptional Learners”?

Exceptional learners...

- **Differ from the norm (either below or above) to such an extent that they require an individualized program of special education and related services to fully benefit from education**
- Intellectual disabilities
- Learning disabilities
- Emotional/behavioral disorders
- Autism
- Speech/language impairments
- Hearing impairments
- Visual impairments
- Physical/health impairments
- Traumatic brain injury
- Multiple disabilities
- Giftedness and talents

The Importance of Early Intervention

Early intervention...

- **Consists of a comprehensive system of therapies, educational, nutritional, child care, and family supports, designed to enhance early development (Smith & Guralnik, 2007)**
- **Can provide both intermediate and long-term benefits for young children with disabilities and those at risk for developmental delay (Guralnik, 2005)**

The Importance of Early Intervention

Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities Program (Part C) of IDEA was designed to:

- **Enhance the development of infants and toddlers w/ disabilities**
- **Minimize potential developmental delay**
- **Reduce educational costs to our society through a decreased need for special education as children reach their school-age years**

The Benefits of Early Intervention

High quality early intervention services...

- Can alter a child's developmental trajectory
- Positively impact outcomes across developmental domains:
 - **Health**
 - **Language and communication**
 - **Cognitive development**
 - **Social/emotional development**
- Can improve outcomes for children, families, and communities

The Importance of Parent and Family Involvement

Parents and the family...

- Are the child's **best advocates**
- Are the child's **first teachers**
- Are with the child everyday throughout his/her educational career
- Have the **greatest vested interest** in their children and are usually the most knowledgeable about their needs
- Have to **live with the results** of educational decisions

(Heward, 2013)

Parent-Teacher Partnerships

- Effective partnerships are characterized by family members and professionals jointly pursuing shared goals in the context of mutual respect (Heward, 2013)
- “A relationship in which families and professionals agree to build on each other’s expertise and resources, as appropriate, for the purpose of making and implementing decisions that will directly benefit students and indirectly benefit other family members and professionals” (Turnbull et al., 2011, p. 137)
- The effectiveness of educational programs for children with disabilities is enhanced when parents and families are actively involved (e.g., Newman, 2004; Resetar, Noell, & Pellegrin, 2006)

Parents and Teachers as “Partners”

- “*A student-focused philosophy* – collaborate for the learning progress of the student
- *A belief in shared responsibility* – both in-and out-of-school time impacts achievement
- *Quality of the relationship* – how parent and teacher work together in meaningful ways
- *A preventive, solution-oriented focus* – create conditions that encourage and support student’s school engagement”

(S. Christenson, 2002)

Understanding Families of Children with Disabilities

Adjustment process may include feelings of:

- Shock, denial, and disbelief; lack of realization of full impact
- Anger, guilt, depression, shame, and overprotectiveness
- Acceptance, appreciation, and pride; *self-actualization*
- Educators should refrain from expecting parents to exhibit any kind of typical reaction (Blacher, 1984; Ferguson, 2003)
- ***Listening*** to families is key in working with them as partners in supporting the learning and development of their child with special needs (Ulrich & Bauer, 2003)

The Many Roles of the Exceptional Parent

Caregiver - Additional needs of an exceptional child can cause stress

Provider - Additional needs often create a financial burden

Teacher - Exceptional children often need more teaching to acquire skills

Counselor - Must often help their child cope with the disability

Parent of Siblings Without Disabilities - Meet the needs of their other children

Behavior Support Specialist - Some have to become skilled behavior managers

Marriage Partner - Having a child with disabilities can put stress on a marriage

Information Specialist/Trainer for Significant Others - Must train others

Advocate - Advocate for effective educational services and opportunities

(Heward, 2013)

Professional Collaboration and Teaming

- Collaboration
 - Teachers are better able to analyze and solve problems in the classroom when they work together
 - Coordination - ongoing communication and cooperation to ensure that services are provided in a timely and systematic fashion
 - Consultation - team members provide information and expertise to one another
- Teaming
 - Multidisciplinary team - composed of professionals from different disciplines who work independently of one another
 - Interdisciplinary team - characterized by formal channels of communication between members
 - Transdisciplinary teams - Members seek to provide services in a uniform and integrated fashion

Inclusion

- Inclusion is *not* the same as “least restrictive environment”
- Inclusion means educating students with disabilities in general education classroom environments – with their non-disabled peers
- Schools generally use four ways of helping students with disabilities participate in the gen. ed. classroom:
 - Collaborative consultation
 - Co-teaching and other team arrangements
 - Curricular and instructional strategies
 - Accommodations and adaptations

Supported Inclusive Education

- Supported inclusive education refers to the opportunity for all students, **regardless of their disability**, to be educated in **age-appropriate** general education classes in their **neighborhood school in natural proportions**.
- All necessary **supports** are provided to students and educators to ensure meaningful participation in the total school community.

Adapted from Evolution of the Concept of Inclusion in School Programs for Students with More Severe Disabilities, B. Wilcox.

The Benefits of Inclusion

- **Preparation for adult living**
- **Improved learning through peers and greater exposure**
- **Growth for peers**
- **Effective use of resources**
- **Friendship development**
- **Acceptance of differences**
- **Team building**
- **Focus on strengths**
- **Support of civil rights**

Adapted from Steps to Integration Parent Materials, Utah Parent Center, Utah and Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Differentiation

- “A broad term referring to the need to tailor teaching environments, curricula, and instructional practices... for students with different needs, interests, readiness, and learning profiles” (Heward, 2013, p. 474)
- Differentiation is responsive teaching rather than one-size-fits-all teaching
- “It means teachers **proactively** plan varied approaches to **what** students need to learn, **how** they will learn it, and/or how they will **show what they have learned** in order to increase the likelihood that each student will learn as much as he or she can, as efficiently as possible” (Tomlinson, 2012)

Differentiation

Teachers can differentiate at least four classroom components based on student differences:

- **Content** – what the student needs to learn or how the student will access the information;
- **Process** – activities in which the student engages in order to make sense of or master the content;
- **Products** – projects or assessments that require the student to rehearse, apply, and extend what he or she has learned in a lesson or unit; and
- **Learning environment** – the way the classroom works and feels.

Managing Problem Behaviors

- **Why do undesired behaviors occur?**
 - **Unintended reinforcement of the behavior**
 - **Unrecognized antecedents of the behavior**
 - **Adult error**
 - **Communication difficulties or roadblocks**
 - **Self-stimulation/sensory needs**
- **A specific behavior is considered to be a problem behavior if it:**
 - **Interferes with learning**
 - **Interferes with the ability to respond to the environment**

Strategies for Managing Problem Behaviors

- **Determine the function of the behavior**
 - Think about the “ABC’s” of behavior
 - Observe the behavior and collect data
 - Analyze the data to determine the function
- **Implement behavior change strategies**
 - Antecedent strategies
 - Consequence strategies
 - Skills acquisition

The Importance of Teaching Life Skills

- **Academic skills**
- **Daily living skills**
- **Personal/social skills**
- **Occupational (vocational) skills**

Daily Living Skills

- **Managing personal finances**
- **Selecting/managing a household**
- **Caring for personal needs**
- **Safety awareness**
- **Acquiring, preparing, and consuming food**
- **Purchasing and maintaining clothing**
- **Exhibiting responsibility as a citizen**
- **Using public transportation, getting around community**
- **Engaging in recreational and leisure activities**

(Brolin, 1989)

Personal/Social Skills

- **Interpersonal skills**
- **Communicating with others**
- **Self-awareness**
- **Self-confidence**
- **Socially responsible behavior**
- **Problem-solving skills**

Occupational (Vocational) Skills

- **Knowing, exploring, and selecting occupational options**
- **Exhibiting appropriate work habits and behavior**
- **Seeking and maintaining employment**
- **Obtaining job training**

(Edgar, 1988)

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