



THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI
 INSTITUTE FOR
 DISABILITY STUDIES

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Possibilities

Early Childhood Inclusion

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PREPARE Essentials

Teaching Children about Differences

While it is important to practice inclusion in your early childhood centers, it is even more important to help children understand how they are alike and how they are different. Just as every new day is different and provides a new experience for each of us, people are different as well. Each and every one of us have differences...differences in the way we look, the way we talk, the way we act, the way we react, the way we learn and the way we laugh and cry. As teachers, we should make a special effort to assist children in understanding and valuing human differences as well as similarities.

Our educational settings should truly celebrate the options and choices that support children in understanding and appreciating the beauty of individual differences. The environments in which children spend their time should reflect each child's background and unique abilities. Young children are not born with attitudes that cause them to discriminate against others, and as early childhood educators, caregivers and parents, we should encourage children to respect the views of others. Diversity can be taught through books about children from different cultures and countries with customs, art and music infused across learning centers.



It is also important for children to feel comfortable asking questions about the differences they see. Children look to you as their model in uncomfortable or unfamiliar situations, therefore make sure you observe how the children react when they see individuals of different cultures or abilities and provide a model of how they should react.

Remember that education is the key to accepting differences. It is up to you to help children understand that even with differences we are all alike in many ways.

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An Interventionist's Perspectives

As preschoolers begin to notice similarities and differences, they may ask you some direct questions about what they see. It is important to listen to their questions and not criticize their intentions. Children are simply curious about how others are different. In situations such as the following examples, provide children with accurate information that is simple and easy to understand. If they want to know more, we all know they will ask!



Child: "Why can't he walk?"

Teacher: "Johnnie's legs do not work like yours and mine. He has a chair that helps him move around like our legs help us move around."

Child: "Why does she wear that thing in her ear?"

Teacher: "It's called a hearing aid, and it helps her to hear."

Child: "Why does she always shake her hands?"

Teacher: "That is her way of letting us know that she is excited. Sometimes people smile, and sometimes they jump up and down. When Kelley is excited about playing with a toy or listening to a story, she shakes her hands."

Child: "Why does he always push us?"

Teacher: "As you know, Michael does not use words to talk like you do. So when he wants to play, he touches you to let you know. He doesn't mean to push so hard; he just wants to be your friend. Let's try to teach him together to use soft touches."

Child: "Why is her skin color different than mine?"

Teacher: "We all have different shades of skin. Some people have dark skin like you and I do, and some people have medium or light skin. Some even have lots of red freckles like Katie."

It is most important to be upfront and direct with children while answering their questions about the similarities and differences they notice between themselves and others. As children begin to understand that each person is special in their own way, they will develop friendships regardless of differences. Most importantly, inclusive settings allow children to develop respect for others.

Parts of this article were adapted from "Welcoming all children: Creating inclusive child care," 2004.



Children need opportunities to interact with peers and adults in an environment that provides them with security and acceptance.

Judith Evans (1998)

Resource Room

The following books introduce differences among children and reflect friendships among children of various abilities.



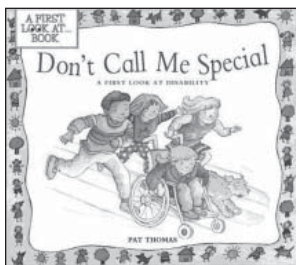
“Tobin Learns to Make Friends”, by Diane Murrell, is a great tool for teaching children about pervasive developmental disorders such as autism and Asperger’s Syndrome.

The book follows Tobin, a train, as he learns how to properly engage in social activities and make friends in the process.

“My Friend Isabelle”, by Eliza Woloson, is a book that teaches children about differences and how to accept those differences. It introduces two friends, Isabelle and Charlie, who are friends who are the same age but are developing differently. At the end of the story readers meet the real Isabelle, who is the author’s daughter, and the author briefly notes how having Down syndrome makes her daughter special.



“Don’t Call Me Special”, by Pat Thomas, is a picture book that explores questions and concerns about physical disabilities in a simple and reassuring way. Younger children can find out about individual disabilities, special equipment that is available to help children with special needs, and how people of all ages can deal with disabilities and live happy and full lives.



The book, “Friends at School,” by Rochelle Bunnett, portrays children of mixed abilities busily working

and playing at school. It serves to illustrate the true meaning of inclusion and shows that given the opportunity, children readily accept each other’s differences. The book emphasizes that even though some children may look different and have different abilities, all children like to do the same things.



There are also fun activities you can plan for children in your early childhood classrooms to teach them what it would be like to have certain disabilities. For example, if you want to teach your children what it would be like to lose their sight, put a blindfold over their eyes and ask them to try to paint a picture without looking. If you want to teach them what it would be like to not be able to hear, have them wear headphones while playing in the various learning centers. To teach them what it would be like to not be able to use their arms, have them hold their hands behind their backs while trying to put on their shoes. Each of these activities will help children become more aware of the challenges that children with special needs experience and will ultimately help them become more accepting of differences.

Getting Started: Diversity

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R) devotes a section of its guidelines to promoting acceptance of diversity. Not only does the ECERS-R stress the importance of teaching about cultural diversity, but it also outlines how early childhood centers should teach about children with diverse abilities. Child care providers should select materials that foster acceptance of differences. (cont’d p. 4)



Getting Started:Diversity (cont'd from p. 3)

The following is a list of suggestions to consider:

- Books about people from various ethnic (racial) and cultural groups – from countries like Japan, Africa and the U.S.
- Books of men and women doing jobs inside and outside the home in a variety of work activities (teachers, mail carriers, doctors, nurses, pilots, etc.)
- Books about children and adults with varying abilities and disabilities
- Books about diversity in family styles for example, single parent families, extended families, grandparent and child families, interracial and multi-ethnic families, etc.
- Posters or displays of photographs or pictures of the above bulleted examples
- Puzzles with a variety of people
- Dolls and puppets from various ethnic backgrounds and nationalities as well as some with disabilities
- Food types from more than one culture or nationality
- Music activities such as folk dancing and songs from other countries

For more resources on diversity and teaching young children about differences, please visit the National Organization for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Web site at www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/200511/DiversityResourcesBTJ1105.asp and the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY) Web site at www.nichcy.org/pubs/bibliog/bib5.pdf.

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To subscribe or to submit materials (pictures, articles, etc.) for consideration, contact Susan Phillips at 601.266.5163, 1.888.671.0051 or Susan.Phillips@usm.edu.

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