

Preparing your child for school

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Hunt & Goetz (1997). Students with severe disabilities -review of 19 research investigations

- Parent involvement is an essential component of effective inclusive schooling
- Students with severe disabilities can achieve positive academic and learning outcomes in inclusive settings.
- They can realise acceptance, interactions, and friendships in inclusive settings.
- Students without disabilities experience positive outcomes when children with severe disabilities are their classmates.
- Collaborative efforts among school personnel are essential to successful inclusion.
- Curricular adaptations are a vital component in effective inclusion efforts. (pp25-26)

Beginning School --Six months or more before school begins:

Work out what are the most important things for you in relation to your child's education. For example:

- For my child to 'belong'.
- For my child to be safe and secure from being hurt and teased.
- For my child to be happy.
- For my child to grow up with his/her neighborhood peers.
- For my child to achieve the best academic outcomes possible.

We want them all but have to priorities. In ideal environments all are achievable but most environments are not ideal for the entire child's school life.

- Determine what time and energy you can contribute.
- Visit potential schools. If you want inclusion, start with your neighbourhood school.
- Get a feel for the welcome. Inclusion depends on will and skill. Is the will there? In most cases it is- don't confuse with uncertainty. If the will is present, skills are much easier to cater for.
- If you don't feel welcome, would another school be welcoming? Will there be a space for your child?

When you have chosen your school:

- Visit the school and perhaps help or at least visit in the classroom where your child is likely to be going.
- Find out key skills that will be required in the school and classroom. Start teaching those skills if your child has not got them.

Likely important skills:

- Following instructions.
- Working in groups. Sharing, taking turns.
- Using scissors, glue, and paint.
- Staying in a set area.

- Sitting on a mat looking at a board/teacher.
- Cooperating on a task with other child/children.
- Academic skills e.g. alphabet, numbers.
- Reasonable noise level.

The more of these types of skills that your child has, the easier the transition is likely to be, but even if the child hasn't got them they are likely to be learned rapidly when at school.

- Join your school P&F group. If you are seen from the start as a contributing member of the school community partnerships are easier and more likely.
- Develop links with other families. If you are seen as 'one of the mob', then your child is likely to also be more easily accepted.
- Work in the school canteen-- alliances are built here.

Before the end of the previous school year:

- If your child's teacher is likely to need assistance in the classroom, then this has to be organized by the principal. Giving lots of warning helps him/her to get this assistance.
- 'Over preparing' a school can highlight difference of your child. 'Under preparing' can leave your child's teacher feeling put upon. You need to think through the appropriate balance for your child-- you are the expert with your child. Discuss with your Service Provider, Local Area Coordinator etc.
- If at all possible, meet your child's 'next year teacher' before the end of the previous school year. If there is social contact early, partnerships are easier. Ask

what you can do to help prepare.

- Be positive, positive, positive. Teachers are likely to be feeling apprehensive, uncertain if they can cope and have all the societal stereotypes about autism/Down Syndrome/disability.
- Get permission to visit the school with your child. Perhaps your child could join in the routine for a session. Give your child experience of the layout.
- Talk to your child about the school and going there (this will depend on your child- some children want immediacy).

Prepare a booklet "Introducing Gertrude". We must get across the fact that 'Gertrude' is a child first with an individual personality, a range of strengths and similar needs to other children. In addition she will need some specific attention to some areas due to particular needs, but she is a child first who needs to belong

Introductory Book

Some suggestions for an 'introductory book'

- Picture of your child on the front.
- If it works for you, write it in first person as though your child is talking.
- Introduce your child as you might introduce yourself to someone at a social gathering who you have become friendly with. For example:
 - Family background, demographic information (facts about your child and where you live etc.).
 - Interests, important prior events in your child's life.

 - Areas of particular need for assistance.
 - Likes, dislikes, things to avoid etc.

When in school --Preparing your Child for Transition to the Next School Year

- Find out who the next year's teacher is. If the Principal is supportive he/she will have thought this through and arranged a teacher already at the school. (Not always possible).
- Meet the new teacher and give him/her the 'introductory book'.
- Ask what you can do to help to prepare your child for next year.
- Ask the teacher for advice on how to teach particular skills (teachers love to be asked for advice).
- Arrange for your current teacher, yourself and the new teacher to meet and discuss broad arrangements for next year.
- Teachers and Principals will know less about disability/specific syndromes than

you in most cases. They will however know the societal stereotypes.

- Hence you will be seen as a bit threatening.
- Your child may be a cause for them to be uncertain, even scared because of the societal stereotypes.
- However most are willing to be inclusive if they feel that they are being supported and it is not a 'dump' on them.
- We have an historical habit of treating children with a disability differently and in segregated settings. This habit is ingrained and will be seen as 'right' by many/most.

Teachers and Principals need rewards and acknowledgment.

- Acknowledge acceptance of your child.
- Write letters to their boss. That is, to the Principal for a good Teacher, District Superintendent for the Principal.
- Don't nitpick. Choose issues carefully to rise as problems. Go to your priority list.
- Don't sit on issues that are burning you up. You can end up 'exploding' over a 'last straw' and be seen as erratic and unreasonable. Raise issues in the context of seeking advice from the teacher. "It seems that... is not working too well. What do you suggest we could do as an alternative?"

- **Be careful of what you ask for- you might get it!** Asking for lots of individual support/therapy and input might result in your child becoming less included due to the impact on the teacher and other children. Similarly, a lot of research has indicated that educational assistants can reduce social inclusion, independence and academic achievement if not used appropriately. Think back to your priorities.

Eight elements of inclusion

- Presence
- Curricular inclusion
- Social inclusion
- Self-image
- Image in the eyes of others
- Teaching relevance
- Teaching potency
- Expectations.

The Eight Deadly Sins of Professionals: So be prepared. From Bailey, D.B., & Wolery, M. (1992). Teaching infants and preschoolers with disabilities. (2nd Ed.) NY, Maxwell Macmillan.

1. **Professional Ignorance:** Lack of basic information.
2. **Professional hopelessness:** Defeatist attitude.
3. **Referral ad infinitum:** Repeated referrals for yet another specialised assessment.
4. **Veil of Secrecy:** Withholding 'threatening' information.
5. **Deaf ear syndrome:** Ignoring ideas, requests or suggestions made by parents
6. **Professional omniscience:** Staunch defense of professional opinions and expertise.
7. **Professional omnipotence:** Assuming that professionals have the wisdom to make life defining decisions for others.
8. **Parents as patients:** Viewing parents as being in need of therapy to 'accept' their child's diagnosis or to alleviate depression- particularly likely if parents disagree with professional's opinions

If things go wrong...

Unfortunately, while inclusion has been shown to be superior to segregated schooling for building academic skills as well as friendships, our society has a huge historical habit of excluding and rejecting people with disabilities. This means that parents often experience both subtle and direct messages that their child is not wanted, or experience things happening to their child that are clearly harmful--physically, emotionally or to their learning. As parents, protection of our child from harm is a core concern so our reaction is likely to be anger, resentment and even desire to punish those who have committed the injustice or harm.

Some considerations:

- Often harm is unconsciously done or done from misguided good intentions. Education may work here where anger may be counterproductive.
- Look to how big the issue is. All children experience some unfairness, rejection,

teasing, bad teaching ... If your priority is your child 'belonging', taking on an academic issue strongly may jeopardise this main priority. Consider if the problem encountered is best left now and handled positively at a later stage or if it is a central issue that needs to be addressed immediately. If every problem is raised it is easy for you to be seen as winging or overprotective.

- Children learn best on a 4-1 ratio or better. That is, at least four positives for good behavior to every one 'telling off'. Same rule works for teachers and principals.
 - If positives are not working and harm is still being done, balance the costs of taking it further to the benefits of getting the problem resolved by force. It may be that a different school that is welcoming might be a better alternative-- and then take on the issue at the previous school. That is, secure your child's education before taking on a situation that might cause it to be jeopardised.
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- If you are going to 'take on' the system seriously, the likelihood is that it will be very costly emotionally and in time, and possibly financially. Your child's education at the school that you are taking on is likely to be 'frozen' as everyone takes on defensive positions. Hence the need to secure the child's education before going down this path.

Some defensive strategies

- Discrimination is illegal. The law and senior officials in education are likely to be on your side if discrimination has occurred. (See <http://www.include.corn.au/resources.html>).
- ALWAYS have someone go to formal school meetings with you. A Local Area Coordinator, friend, neighbour spouse etc. Never go alone as you will have no independent witness if bad things happen (they are also less likely to happen with a second person there).
- If you don't agree that the minutes of the meeting are accurate, WRITE immediately to the principal stating your disagreement. If you don't the minutes become the official record.
- Keep an exercise book next to the phone and record contact with the school- who, date, time and a short note. This then becomes an official record if problems occur and stronger than recollection of individuals later.

- Don't lose your cool. Any loss of temper will be recorded and used against you. Similarly, abusive or threatening letters can rebound. Cool, calm and tenacious is much more likely to work.
- Join with others. To take on a billion dollar organization as a parent is beyond most of us.

A group however becomes very powerful. Ask your Local Area Coordinator for parents to network with or see <http://www.inclusion.org.au>



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