

Determining Classroom Readiness

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There are three major factors to look at when considering placing of a child with autism into a typical classroom setting. All parents would love to see their child thrive within a typical classroom setting, but it is important to realize where their child's needs would best be served. In order to determine appropriate placement we must look at the following three conditions:

- 1) The goals that the child will be working on that year
- 2) What environments and additional services that are available
- 3) Teaching skills of the instructional staff

Every child with special needs is entitled to an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). This plan is developed by both professionals from various fields and the parents of the child. The IEP states the goals and objectives that the team feels are appropriate for that particular child. It is important that the goals chosen are attainable and measurable. They should be specific and derived from prerequisite skills that the child already exhibits. The IEP should identify critical skills that the child must learn in order to acquire additional skills without highly specialized instruction. The goal is to help the child become as independent as possible and decrease his/her need for restrictive environments.

After the team has developed the IEP, the next step is looking at implementation. At this time it is important for the team to look at the goals just written and determine where teaching will occur. This is an important step in the process. It is important to look at the child's current classroom setting (including peers, instructional staff, set-up, etc). It may not be possible to work on some of the objectives in that setting (i.e. Teaching a child to work on conversational behavior if all of his peers are non-verbal). It is the responsibility of the team to determine the appropriate setting for instruction to occur. Most placement for children with autism involves a combination of educational settings. Each child should be taught with as few restrictions as possible. The setting should be determined by the individual child's ability to function and participate within the setting. Success within the setting is determined by the child's ability to learn from that environment. The team needs to look not only at that particular child's learning history, but also at the availability of resources that can be offered to that child. The team must look at classroom size, student to teacher ratio, and the background training given to the instructors. It is important for the classroom teacher to be aware of the child's special needs and be properly trained to implement effective teaching procedures for that particular child.

The major advantage of inclusion within a typical classroom setting is the ongoing models of typical language and social interaction. Children are not only able to learn the right words to say, but also when to use them. There are many opportunities for modeling of appropriate language for the child to imitate.

This being said, it is important for the team to determine if the child will benefit from these models. Is the child verbal? Does the child have emerging skills of verbal imitation and motor imitation? Does the child have basic communication skills that will allow him to attend to critical aspects of the models? Do the peers have the skills required to help the child? Are they initiating interaction? Are they able to engage the child?

When considering inclusion the team must also look at the disadvantages of inclusion. First and foremost, inclusion lends way to decreased abilities for individualized instruction. The child is now learning with the group and must learn new skills with little or no 1:1 time. The child must be able to understand receptive instructions with ease and have strong imitation skills. It is difficult for the



teacher to deliver individualized instruction and individualized reinforcement. Praise and completion of task serve as primary reinforcement within the classroom setting. It is rare that the teacher will be able to capture the individual motivation of the children.

Another thing to consider is the behavior of the child. Inclusive settings are often less tolerant of disruptive behaviors because of the negative effects it may have on other children. Within an inclusive setting, the function of the child's behavior may not be determined. Instead the behavior may be treated topographically (i.e. if any child screams/hits another child ,he is removed from the activity.). If the function of that behavior was a means of escape, then the behavior was inadvertently reinforced. The instructors may not have the training or the time to devote to the complexity of behavior and may unknowingly reinforce maladaptive behaviors.

Obviously, there are a lot of things to consider when determining if a child is ready for an inclusive setting. It is important to look at all factors. The key is individualization. First determine what the child's educational needs are and then determine the best place for implementation. You may find that a combination of settings is the best situation for that child. Whatever the decisions are, make sure that there is accurate data taken on the child's rate of acquisition and be sure to meet as a team frequently. The child's needs may change over the course of a year. It is important to review his accomplishment and adjust the situations as needed.

