

The Key to Successful Inclusion in Child Care

Collaboration with Special Education and Related Services Staff

by Amanda Schwartz

Rana is a 3-year-old with autism. She loves to run, jump and play. In the classroom, she watches her classmates but she is not able to communicate with them well. One morning, the teachers set up an open-ended activity with stacking blocks. While Rana lined them up, other children came and tried to stack them, causing Rana to have a temper tantrum and throw the blocks on the floor. Her teachers struggle to know how to help her during these moments. Knowing they have support, they reach out to other members of Rana's Individualized Education Plan team for ideas. They try two new strategies: a communication board and pictures to show her how to use the blocks. Luckily, both strategies work for Rana and she discovers a new way to interact with others in her class.

Thinking through how to engage a child in learning is one of the wonderful challenges of teaching, but one that may require support. A child with a disability comes with a wealth of additional resources through their Individualized Family Service Plan or Individualized Education Plan. Special education partners offer advice, guidance and tools to ensure the inclusion of a child and his or her family in all child care settings.

A Team Approach

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act focuses on the importance of the multi-disciplinary team that makes and implements decisions about services for children with disabilities. This team must include at least one general education teacher in addition to the parent and all the special education and related service personnel. The child care teacher represents the daily experiences of the child when he or she is in the program. This general education voice not only speaks about the child's developmental progress, but also the

strengths and challenges observed every day. Understanding the child's life helps the team develop and implement a meaningful plan that scaffolds learning and encourages growth.

This team approach yields many benefits. Access to information about the child's physical and mental health, daily routines, and preferences come from different teammates. Additionally, teammates with specialties in speech and language, fine and gross motor, and social and emotional development



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have strategies and tools to share. These accommodations and supports can offer a teacher new ideas to remove barriers and improve a child's access to learning. Listening and sharing with each other in the team environment means the child can access needed resources in any setting. But, it requires each teammate to be open to the ideas of others and willing to try new things.

Collaboration Strategies for Teachers

Thinking about concrete ways to work together makes a difference for every team. Special education partners can offer a variety of supports to child care teachers. They can:

- support the identification and referral process for children and families;
- co-teach in the classroom setting;
- observe, model, and share strategies;
- work with teachers to identify and respond to challenges;
- analyze child data and plan lessons collaboratively; and
- communicate consistent messages with families.

The child care teacher's role is to find the best ways to work with other teammates. This facilitates a comprehensive, coordinated approach and enables each individual to understand their roles and responsibilities. Just remember, positive relationships lead to important outcomes for children and families, while helping each team member perform their best.

Create a Welcoming Environment

The first step to building relationships with other teammates who will be in

and out of the child care setting is to create a space in which everyone feels comfortable contributing. This means making both the physical and mental space for collaboration. Some of the ideas to think about include:

- creating a physical space in the setting where teammates can support children and/or keep the equipment they will need to use;
- setting aside regular collaborative planning time;
- using clearly defined written and verbal communication strategies;
- ensuring all teammates have access to the information they need; and
- scheduling time in the daily or weekly schedule for team members to work with children.

Formalize Collaborations

Written agreements can help teams define expectations. By putting each individual's roles and responsibilities on paper, each team member has clear accountability and expectations. These agreements can be working documents, which are revised as the child's needs change and the team shifts their responsibilities to meet them. When developing these contracts, make sure they include:

- each teammate's contribution and expertise;
- expectations for each teammate, as well as for child and family outcomes;
- roles and responsibilities for each teammate;
- a collaboration time with specific activities that the team will engage in

(e.g., weekly planning, case management); and

- a process for regular check-ins.

Participate in Meetings

As part of the IEP/IFSP team, child care teachers should attend all meetings related to children with disabilities (or at risk for identification) in their settings. These meetings may focus on child study or evaluation, IEP/IFSP eligibility and planning, re-evaluation and transition. As the voice of the teacher with daily interactions, the child care teacher can:

- describe the child's engagement in daily activities, including strengths and challenges on the developmental continuum and within early childhood standards;
- organize assessment data from the classroom that provides evidence of the child's developmental status;
- share child products that offer a clear picture of child ability, preferences, culture, and personality;
- identify the kinds of questions the team should be asking about the child's development and expectations for the future; and
- detail recommendations about next steps for the child, including outcomes/goals and supports/accommodations to help the child reach them.

Communicate Clearly

When working as a team, there are many perspectives at the table. Making sure you are communicating clearly while respecting the rights of the child and the family is important. The

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act governs the way information is captured, stored, and shared in child care settings. Making sure child care policies and procedures align with this law is the first step to clear communication. Once the policy is defined, consider ways to communicate among the team, including:

- weekly activity logs;
- direct emails through a protected server;
- shared filing systems (online and paper) with password protections;
- “standing meetings” to debrief about activities and progress; and
- on-the-spot communication.

Ask for Support

When teams work together, there can be challenges. Having a system in place to find solutions is important. Child care teachers can ask for support from others to help them think through better ways to collaborate. Some of the supports available include:

- reflective supervision with administrators;
- consultation with mental health and special education consultants;
- professional development courses;
- mentors/coaches; and
- peer supports and professional study groups.

You Can Do It!

Including children with disabilities in child care settings requires significant collaboration and support. No one person can do it alone, and working with others requires planned, intentional strategies. Making the effort to build positive relationships can lead to better instruction and optimal experiences for children, families and teachers. Keep the doors to collaboration open and you will see all the wonderful things that can happen for the children and families you serve.

