

Early Childhood Special Education

Creating Supports for Young Children with Disabilities in Natural Environments

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusion of children with disabilities is currently recognized as a preferred service delivery model in early childhood care and education (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Division for Early Childhood, 1994; Odom & McLean, 1996). Children with disabilities, particularly those who might be considered as having significant disabilities, must receive the proper kind of support to ensure meaningful participation and membership into settings with age appropriate nondisabled peers. The concept of accommodating children with disabilities is not new, however, how such accommodations or supports are provided continues to receive recent attention.

For the purposes of this discussion, supports will be discussed within the context of natural environments (i.e., environments where same aged peers without disabilities are found). There are many natural environments within the community where young children with disabilities are included such as homes, play groups, child care centers, Head Start programs, kindergartens, and preschools. When appropriate accommodations and services are provided to youngsters with disabilities in natural environments, they receive the kind of support they need to become valued members and learners within that setting.

UNDERSTANDING SUPPORT ISSUES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

It becomes necessary to examine the ways in which support might be different for young children with disabilities as opposed to older children and adults.

Although some of the issues may be the same (i.e., creating unintentional dependence on support), there are distinctive issues faced by practitioners who work with young children because of the distinctive characteristics of early childhood. For example, there is an implicit understanding of the significance of families during the formative early childhood years. Naturally, families are important at all stages of development, but particularly when children are infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, it is widely accepted that the family is the primary caregiver as well as the central focus to a child's life. The opportunities and necessity for family participation, therefore, becomes paramount in early childhood education.

Secondly, peer relationships are generally the first meaningful and fundamental experiences young children have outside of their family networks. Because youngsters are beginning to experiment with these important social encounters, it is imperative that these first peer experiences be healthy and rewarding. Another distinguishing issue between support provided to younger children and support provided to older children and adults centers on independence. There is a natural and necessary interdependence between young children and adults, some of whom are paid for their services (i.e., teacher, caregiver); and yet, for older children less reliance on adults, especially those adults paid to be with them, is a common aim so that overdependence on adults does not occur.

Defining supports in early childhood is essential for service providers and families who will most likely identify and implement the supports, as well as for administrators and researchers who will likely analyze the process and outcomes associated with it.

EMERGING QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING SUPPORTS

In a discussion of supports for adults, Hagner (1996) suggested that principles, not concepts or strategies, drive intervention. So that supports in early child-

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hood can be more clearly understood, the following values and principles must serve as the basis for the set of guidelines which will be presented shortly: meaningful participation, relationships, membership, positive outcomes, and honoring the culture within an environment.

The following two key questions should be addressed when considering supports for a young child: (a) what are the expectations for other children or the group now, and (b) what, if anything, does the child with a disability need in order to have positive and similar experiences now? Those two questions serve as the foundation in determining what supports will actually be needed. Using the two questions above as a framework, the following definition of supports is offered: Assistance using people (i.e., peers, adults), environmental adaptations, materials, or strategies in natural settings that:

- (a) ensures that the child is participating in an active and meaningful way in an experience or activity,
- (b) strongly promotes peer relationships and membership within the group,
- (c) produces outcomes for the child that are healthy, meaningful and individualized, and
- (d) is consistent with the climate and culture of the natural setting.

Within this definition there is a heavy emphasis on social relationships and belonging because these are two important outcomes for young children with and without disabilities.

Ensuring that all the aspects of this definition are honored would be an important factor in achieving positive and successful outcomes. It is critical, therefore, that all the aspects of the definition are perceived as holding equal importance and that these parts are viewed as interdependent of one another.

Very young children (under the age of 5 years), in particular, are often the unwilling recipients of decisions and choices that are made for them. For young children who experience significant disabilities, the opportunities to exercise control over their lives and environment are even more limited. The issue of what type and how to provide support to children with significant disabilities becomes a unique challenge because these children often have multiple priorities and require intensive assistance. It becomes difficult to know how to balance the child's need for independence while providing assistance to ensure participation.

The guidelines below are an attempt to help practitioners and families make informed decisions about how to create supports for young children with disabilities in inclusive settings.

Table I. Examples of Supports in Early Childhood

Types of support	Explanation of supports	Examples of supports
Peers	Typical peers found in natural settings	Classmates Busmates Neighborhood children
Adults	Adults generally found in natural settings as a first option	Classroom teachers Instructional aides Related service providers
Environmental adaptations	Adaptations or modifications within the immediate setting	Environmental markers Ramps Increase/decrease use of sunlight
Materials	Materials that promote independence and active participation	Enlarged books Modified zipper Velcro
Strategies	Approaches/techniques that promote active participation and independence	Positioning/handling Incidental teaching Activity-based intervention

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR DEVELOPING SUPPORTS

As indicated by the definition above, there are several types of supports to ensure that a child is participating in routines and activities in a meaningful and active way. **Table I** illustrates five main types of supports and provides examples of what each one might look like.

The use of supports provides a practical and unobtrusive way of including youngsters with disabilities in all naturally occurring events and activities. There are general considerations which will safeguard the intent and integrity of supports in early childhood settings. The following guidelines provide a framework for conceptualizing how natural supports can be better understood and identified within natural contexts with young children.

1. *Supports should be as ordinary, nonstigmatizing, and unobtrusive as possible.* Providing support should ensure that the child can participate fully as any other child would. It would be unproductive, therefore, to draw unnecessary or negative attention when trying to achieve this result. Using supports that are least intrusive as a first option would be an important step to ensuring that the child is not stigmatized or isolated. For example, in one preschool class, it was decided that a child's lap tray would no longer be used because it prevented him from sitting at the table with his classmates. Since all the other children also sat on the floor or on bean bag chairs dur-

ing circle time, this same child sat in a bean bag chair with sand bags for support instead of a big, therapeutic-like Rifton chair. By identifying readily available and ordinary materials within natural settings, there is an endless supply of creative and practical resources within reach.

2. *Supports provided by peers should always be considered.* This of course does not mean that children will be responsible for providing all the support all the time. It does imply that typical peers under five years of age are often disregarded or underutilized as potential sources of support. Young children already provide other youngsters positive interactions and important feedback about the world in ways that adults cannot.

There are several studies on peer interactions in inclusive early childhood settings (Buyse, 1993; Goldstein & Cisar, 1992; Guralnick & Groom, 1988; Hanline, 1993); there is very little known about how peers accommodate or support their classmate with a disability. In one study, Erwin (1996) found that typical peers offered a rich variety of spontaneous and planned supports, and applied individualized accommodations appropriately as the school year progressed. Young children are a viable source of support and should be included when creating support strategies.

One of the ways that peers can provide support was highlighted in a mixed age kindergarten-first grade class which included a youngster with multiple disabilities. Peers literally supported their classmate with a disability during story time as they sat next to him on the carpet. If he began to lose his balance, a peer would spontaneously and verbally prompt him to sit up or gently guide him back to a stable seated position. This type of peer support produced a more natural outcome than using a specialized seating device or positioning a large adult in the middle of all the children on the floor. By relying less on adult support, the aim of promoting interdependence as well as dignity can be more clearly realized.

3. *Supports must reflect children's rights to exercise control over the environment and their own lives.* The nature of providing assistance can often lead to loss of independence and personal control. Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, and MacFarland (1997) noted that children with significant disabilities were often faced with great difficulty in retaining control over their own lives (e.g., advocating for their themselves, making choices, rejecting decisions made by others) because of limited opportunities to do so.

There has been increased attention to self-determination in older children, particularly those with significant disabilities. Self determination can be understood as a process by which a person exercises personal control

over his or her life. Often decisions are made for young children with little or no direct input from them. Children with significant disabilities who require intense support needs are often denied the opportunity to make meaningful decisions and choices about their own lives. These decisions may include when to use the bathroom, what and how much to eat for lunch, or whom to sit next to during story time. Brown and Cohen (1996) discussed the concept of self-determination and young children by suggesting that "if special educators do not want to produce adults with learned helplessness...they need to provide more opportunities within their programs to develop and practice the skills that comprise the building blocks of self determination" (p. 24). Some of these building blocks include exerting independence, making decisions, communicating preferences, rejecting decisions, or having control over the immediate environment. Waiting until children reach adulthood before contemplating self determination issues defeats its primary purpose.

Erwin and Kipness (1997) also articulated the need for young children in inclusive settings to have frequent and natural opportunities to make meaningful decisions. Personal control over children's lives extends far beyond trivial opportunities for them to select the color of paper for an art project or what song to sing next. It does mean making decisions about with whom to play or not play, for instance. In other words, a democratic approach to early education can provide children with opportunities and tools so that they can refuse decisions or terminate activities which are made by others on their behalf.

Providing supports for children does not mean preventing or interfering with a child's sense of personal control. Rather, supports must be conceptualized in such a way that meaningful and frequent opportunities are available for children to express their preferences and aversions, participate in important decision making, and exercise control over their immediate environment.

4. *Families should be involved in identifying supports.* Creating, implementing, and evaluating supports should be a collaborative effort between team members, including, of course, the family. Families must be afforded flexibility about how to participate in this process because not all families share the same preferences. If families are not viewed as valuable contributing members of this process, not only will important information be lost but the integrity of the parent-professional partnership will be severely compromised.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children, in its widely respected guidelines "Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs," articulated clearly the fundamen-

tal role families play in understanding fully how children learn and develop: “the younger the child, the more necessary it is for professionals to acquire this knowledge through relationships with children’s families” (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997, p. 22). Families must be involved, to the extent they want to be, in discussions about supports in their child’s life. To ensure consistency across settings and individuals in a child’s life, it is reasonable to expect that supports should be embedded into all natural settings including the playground, car, and grandparents’ houses.

5. *Monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of supports are vital.* It is short sighted to think that all supports provided to a child would be successful. In order to ensure accountability and effectiveness, it is critical to monitor on a consistent basis how the support is being used and the outcome of that support. A beginning point might be to refer back to the original two questions: (a) what are the expectations for the other children now, and (b) what, if anything, does the child with a disability need in order to have positive and similar experiences? Obviously, the most important source of information in identifying, designing and monitoring support strategies is feedback from the child. Learning directly from a child about his priorities, preferences, aversions, and interests is one of the best ways to obtain reliable and accurate information.

6. *A climate that promotes membership and community spirit must exist.* A sense of community and membership is viewed as a quality indicator of inclusive settings (Salisbury, Gallucci, Palombaro, & Peck, 1995; Schnorr, 1990). Fostering a sense of membership implies no child is isolated or stigmatized in any way because each member of the group is a valued and equal member. Furthermore, it is understood that everyone in that setting has unique needs and challenges, just as everyone has unique talents and interests. Requiring support becomes accepted, natural, and routine.

Learning from children about how to create community membership in classrooms has been viewed as an important factor in producing meaningful inclusive educational experiences (Baumgart & Giangreco, 1996; Salisbury *et al.*, 1995). Adults can and should rely on children to express their opinions, share responsibility and make decisions as one means of ensuring that everyone within the group is included. By “turning it over to the kids” as suggested by Salisbury and colleagues (1995), general education elementary teachers were continually amazed by the creativity and compassion demonstrated by their students. Fostering membership in natural settings cannot be so narrowly perceived as a disability-specific goal, but rather a way of embedding val-

ues such as humanity, acceptance, and democracy into everyday reality.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The debate about the role of research in understanding supports (Hughes, 1996), has made it necessary to address the role of empirical evidence. As Hagner (1996) pointed out “it does not make sense to subject the principles themselves [of natural supports] to empirical testing — they function as a guide to strategy development and strategy selection” (p. 181). While conducting research on the values or principles of supports might not make sense, it might be helpful to examine the process and outcomes of developing, implementing, and evaluating them. In an effort to provide a roadmap for further exploration of the use of supports in early childhood contexts, the following questions are posed:

How are decisions made about when and how to use supports? Who is part of the decision making process? How are supports documented on IEPs and IFSPs? How do supports change over time? What factors hinder the use of supports?

The above questions provide a starting point for initiating further inquiry into the process and outcomes of supports. If young children with disabilities are to be included fully in schools and communities, then there must be means of providing the opportunities to do so, naturally.

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