

# Teaching Children With Developmental Disabilities: Classroom Ideas



When working with children with developmental disabilities, teachers can accomplish a great deal by managing the learning environment proactively to prevent behavior problems and promote learning. But identified students may also experience behavior or learning problems because they lack key skills (e.g., capacity to interact with other children in socially appropriate ways). Children with developmental disabilities should therefore have explicit skills-training in deficit areas as a central component in their curriculum.

Here are additional classroom ideas for accommodating students with significant special needs:

**Use visual cues to orient student in the classroom** (Volmer, 1995). Children with developmental disabilities can be much more independent when they have strong visual cues to guide them through the physical space of the classroom. You can, for example:

Use boundary markers such as barriers (e.g., bookcases or other furniture), rugs, and colored tape on the floor to represent boundaries between spaces that are used for different functions. Marked boundaries make it easier for children to know when they are in a space that is dedicated to play, one that is set aside for study, etc. The reality, of course, is that most classroom space is used for multiple purposes. In multi-use spaces, you can employ signs or other visual cues to mark that the space is being used for a particular purpose at a specific time. For example, you might create a sign with a picture of children eating snacks along with the words 'Snack time,' and post that sign on a table to signify that snacks are about to be served.

Store common classroom materials (e.g., school supplies, games) on accessible shelves or in see-through storage containers. When needed, provide labels for these materials (using pictures paired with words). Train students in the procedures that you want them to use in accessing the materials (e.g., first raise hand, then request teacher permission, then go to supplies shelf to get a pencil.)

**Post a clear and predictable daily schedule** (Volmer, 1995). Both typical students and those with developmental disabilities crave structure and predictability in their school day. Special needs children, though, can sometimes react more strongly than their non-disabled peers when faced with an unexpected change in their daily schedule. When creating daily schedules be sure to match the schedule format to the child's skill level:

- For a child who cannot read and does not recognize pictures as depictions of actual objects and events, the 'schedule' would consist of objects that represent schedule entries. A wrapped snack bar, for instance, can represent snack time, while a book can represent circle time—

when the teacher reads a story to the class.

- For a non-reader who recognizes pictures, the schedule can include a picture to represent each scheduled event. A picture of the Occupational Therapist, for instance, might signify a weekly pullout OT session.
- For the beginning reader, the schedule can pair pictures with the words describing the events to the day.
- The fluent reader can use a written schedule, with words selected at the child's reading level.

A *classroom* schedule lays out the events of the day that affect all children in the room. Teachers can also create *individualized* schedules for children who receive additional (or alternative) services and supports. But remember-schedules have value *only* when they are used! Students should *preview* their schedule at the start of the school day. After each activity is completed, students *check off that item* on their schedule or otherwise indicate that the event is finished (e.g., by removing the event's picture from the schedule board). When an event in the student's schedule is unexpectedly cancelled, teachers may find that the student will adjust more quickly to the change if the instructor and the child sit down together review the schedule and revise it to reflect the altered plan for the day.

**Build student motivation.** Motivation is the 'engine' that drives student engagement and learning. Try these ideas to motivate identified students with whom you work:

- Alternate preferred and less-preferred activities (Volmer, 1995). Students are likely to put more intense (and more sustained) effort into challenging assignments when they know that they can take part in a fun or interesting activity at the end of it. (This technique is known as the Premack Principle.)
- Vary the pace and duration of academic activities (Koegel, Koegel & Carter, 1999).
- Provide meaningful choices that give the child some autonomy and control in the classroom. For example, you may encourage the student to select a reading book for an assignment, decide what assignment she or he will work on first, choose a place in the room to study, or pick a peer to help as a study buddy. Make an effort to build choices into school activities whenever possible.
- Use verbal prompts ('pre-correction') before the student engages in a task to promote success (Koegel, Koegel & Carter, 1999). Phrase your prompt to reflect what you would like to see the child *do* (e.g., 'Ronald, please get your math journal and a sharpened pencil and join our math group at the back table.') rather than what you would like the student to *stop* doing. Choose vocabulary and syntax appropriate the child's developmental level. Try not to be wordy!

**Use strategies to make directions and learning expectations clearly understood.** Provide directions in language the student can understand. Use visual cues (hands-on demonstrations and

modeling, objects, pictures) as needed to help the child to better grasp the directions. Prompt and guide the child through the performance-sequence.

Check to be sure that you have the student's attention before giving directions. (NOTE: Children with disabilities may not always make eye contact, even when they are paying attention to you. Be on the lookout for other signs of attending—e.g., alert posture, orientation toward you, stopping other activities, verbalizations). Also, include essential information in your directions that will answer these four questions for the child: (1) *How much work is there to do in this task?* (2) *What exactly am I supposed to do?* (3) *When do I do the work?* and (4) *What is my payoff for doing the work?* (Volmer, 1995).

**Provide structured opportunities for student to participate in social interactions** (Koegel, Kiegel, & Carter, 1999; Volmer, 1995). Children with disabilities are sometimes excluded from social interactions with their typical peers. While there are a number of reasons why identified students may not be fully included in social groups, you can take steps to foster relationships between special-needs and typical children:

- Give the child 'helping roles' such as handing out snacks or distributing work materials to other students. Coach the child to use socially appropriate speech (e.g., "Would you like a snack?") with peers. The more frequently that other students experience neutral or positive interactions with the identified child, the more that they will feel comfortable with that student and the more positive their perceptions of the child will probably be.
- Provide the child with simple strategies to engage others in social interactions. Demonstrate and model these strategies. Then have the child an opportunity to try them out and give him or her feedback and encouragement. For example, train the student to ask a peer "What's that?" whenever he or she sees something unfamiliar in the immediate environment. Or show the student how to approach a group and ask to join a game or other activity (e.g., "Can I join your game?"). A related idea would be to train typical peers as 'social interaction coaches' who can supportively model for the identified child how to initiate social interactions.
- If the child is preoccupied with a particular topic that is relevant to classwork, the teacher may be able to use the student as a resource for peers. For example, a child with autism who has an encyclopedic knowledge of astronomy or geography may attend a review session and answer questions from other students who are studying for a quiz.
- Whenever the teacher forms groups in the classroom, she or he can assign a 'group ambassador' role to one of the typical children. The 'group ambassador' takes responsibility for greeting anyone who joins the group, ensures that all members understand how they can participate in the group activities, and gives additional support and guidance to any student who needs it. 'Group ambassadors' should be trained to recognize when a student might need assistance and in how to provide that assistance in supportive, non-intrusive ways.
- If the child is assigned a teaching assistant, have that assistant train peers in the room to provide academic support while the assistant observes from the background. 'Sign up' children on a rotating basis to serve as peer learning helpers for the identified child. This

strategy will encourage the identified child to see many people in the room as possible supports.

- Assign the child with disabilities a peer buddy when moving around the building, playing outside, or attending assemblies or other events out of the room (Saskatchewan Special Education Unit, 1998). Select different children to serve as peer buddies so the identified child has the chance to build friendships and does not depend too much on any one student for support.

**Create a plan to help the student to generalize their learning across settings and situations.**

Children with significant disabilities are likely to need explicit programming to generalize skills that they have learned in a particular classroom setting to other settings or situations (Koegel, Koegel & Carter, 1999, Volmer, 1995).

- Teach only a small number of 'key' skills at one time so that you will have enough time to work with the student on *generalizing* each mastered skill. After the student has mastered a skill in one setting, list other settings or situations in which you would like the student to show the skill. Then create a training plan to help the student to use the skill in these novel settings. If a child has mastered the task of delivering appropriate social greetings in your classroom, for instance, you might take the child to the school main office or out into the community, prompt them to greet others, and provide praise or rewards for their successful performance.
- Keep other members of the child's teaching team (e.g., parent, speech pathologist, regular-education teacher) informed about what skills the identified student has mastered. Provide ideas to them about how they can encourage the student to use the skill in a new setting and/or with different people and how to reinforce the child for doing so.

**References**

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