

The ***Paraeducator*** *Helping Students Shine* ***Press***

Strategies That Facilitate Social Interactions in Inclusive Classrooms

Dianne Koontz Lowman, Ed.D.,
VDOE Region 5 T/TAC @ JMU

One of the benefits of including students with significant disabilities is the chance to develop social skills and friendships with peers who are typically developing. However, simply placing a student with significant disabilities in the same classroom with peers does not necessarily build social skills and promote interactions with those peers. Systematic intervention from adults is needed to facilitate successful social interactions. Specific suggestions are highlighted in the table on the back of this page.

Answer the Student's Questions

It is common for peers to be curious and ask questions about the student, his/her disability, and/or special equipment. Questions like "Why can't he walk?" or "Why can't she talk?" are opportunities to give peers accurate information and encourage positive attitudes about the student with disabilities. The age of the students will determine how complicated the answer should be. Choose words and concepts the students can understand. For example, when asked what was happening when a tracheostomy tube was being suctioned, one early childhood teacher explained that was like "blowing your nose."

Invite and Encourage Participation

The attitude and style in which adults interact with the student with disabilities will be modeled by the other students in the room. An accepting manner makes the student and the interaction with that student will disabilities seem more approachable. An important role of the adult is to teach the other students how to

assist the student with disabilities without doing the activity for him/her.

Offer Meaningful Content to Conversations on Behalf of the Student

Positive reciprocal interactions form the basis for friendships. The adult facilitator can act as an interpreter in the conversation to allow the student who is nonverbal to contribute to the interaction. For example, if a peer asks "Why is Shawn making that noise?", the adult can explain that the student is feeling happy and then facilitate a discussion on feelings and how people act when they are happy.

Teach Students to Interact Directly with Their Classmates

The next step is to fade out the need for the adult to serve as an interpreter. Teach the peers how to interpret various ways of communicating, such as gestures, pointing, vocalization, eye gaze, yes/no responses, etc.

Allow Spontaneous Interactions to Occur

Constant adult interaction may distract students from developing interactions and conversations. Assistance should be given only when needed.

The information in this article is from Chapter 5 of the *Inclusion Manual* developed by the Circle of Inclusion Project at the University of Kansas. This manual is available from <http://circleofinclusion.org/english/pim/five/instruction.html>.

Strategies That Facilitate Social Interactions in Inclusive Classrooms

- Answer Student's Questions**
- Answer honestly and straightforwardly
 - Answer in a manner appropriate for the age of the students (in terms they can understand)
 - Convey respect for the student with a disability

- Invite and Encourage Participation**
- Use an accepting manner
 - Invite another student to become involved in an ongoing activity
 - Suggest that the student select a new activity to include the student with a disability
 - Prompt meaningful participation in a natural manner

- Add Meaningful Content on Behalf of the Student**
- Address ongoing conversation or activity
 - Emphasize the similarities among the students
 - Relate information as well as experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the student with disabilities

- Teach Students to Interact Directly with Their Classmate with a Disability**
- Teach students to recognize and interpret the nonverbal response of their classmate
 - Teach students to direct their comments and questions directly to their classmate rather than an adult

- Allow Spontaneous Interactions Among Students to Occur**
- Provide assistance without directly participating in the student's interactions
 - Step back and fade physically from the student's interactions

Adapted from: Circle of Inclusion Project. (2002). *Inclusion manual*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas.

Thompson, B., Wickham, D., Wegner, J., Mulligan-Ault, M. Shanks, P., & Reinertson, B. (1993). *Handbook for the inclusion of children with severe disabilities*. Lawrence, KS: Learner Managed Designs.