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ABSTRACT

Ten steps are usually necessary for successful mainstreaming of handicapped children: (1) Assess the handicapped child's readiness for mainstreaming; (2) Assess the parents' readiness level; (3) Meet with the school or agency's chief administrator; (4) Arrange visits to potential mainstreaming sites; (5) Confer with teachers at the chosen site; (6) Schedule a parent/teacher exchange at the selected site; (7) Assess the readiness of classroom peers to accept a handicapped child; (8) Provide a training schedule; (9) Arrange a meeting of the transdisciplinary team; (10) Set up an on-going consultation system. (DB)

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Hampton University Mainstreaming Outreach Services

Hampton, Virginia

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VERY IMPORTANT PRELIMINARY STEPS
FOR
MAINSTREAMING

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INTRODUCTION

Though complex in nature, successful mainstreaming of special needs children is the direct consequence of effective preliminary planning. A team approach to the planning procedures has been proven invaluable, and each member of the transdisciplinary team should be given opportunities for input.

There are ten vital steps that must be taken if successful mainstreaming is to occur. The following sections briefly present these steps and some of the issues involved.

STEP I. ASSESS HANDICAPPED CHILD'S READINESS FOR MAINSTREAMING

It is not sufficient to merely conduct an assessment of the child's pre-academic and academic skill levels. Educators and parents alike must determine (formally or informally) the child's social and emotional readiness for interaction with his/her normal peers, on a regular basis. Answers should be sought to such questions as:

1. How self-confident is he/she?
2. What is the child's view of self?
3. What is the child's frustration level?
4. Does he or /she initiate verbal and/or non-verbal communication with peers?
5. Does the child's physical size dramatically contrast with that of the other members of the mainstreamed setting?

The rationale for mainstreaming a special needs child constitutes another aspect of readiness. For example, Mary may be mastering developmental skills in the cognitive, language and motor areas, but may lack opportunities for the level of socialization needed. In this case, Mary would be mainstreamed for improvement in her socialization skills.

STEP II. ASSESS THE PARENT(S)' READINESS LEVEL

Parental assessments need to be as individualized as those of special needs children. Many parents have ambivalent feelings about their youngsters leaving the protective confines of a special education, self-contained setting. Some parents may need very individualized preparation. While a parent who is an educator by profession may already have an understanding of the benefits of mainstreaming, a dentist, a non-professional, or a homemaker may need exposure to the theoretical concepts involved and to actual mainstreamed settings. Their needs could be met in the following ways:

1. Provide literature on mainstreaming at the parent's estimated level of understanding.
2. Arrange an accompanied tour of local mainstreaming programs.
3. Conduct an informal training session, using a video presentation of a variety of mainstreamed settings (e.g., Young and Special Series).
4. Schedule a question and answer panel of professionals involved for interested parents, guardians and extended family members.

STEP III. MEET WITH SCHOOL OR AGENCY'S CHIEF ADMINISTRATOR

The degree(s) of cooperation and support received from the teaching staff, therapists, and ancillary service personnel will often be influenced by the positive attitudes of the chief administrator. It is imperative, then, to arrange an inter-agency meeting between the child's special education coordinator and the elementary school principal or daycare center supervisor, for example.

During the meeting, the child's specific handicapping condition(s) can be discussed, as well as global issues such as what types of possible placements or class settings are available as options. The primary objective of this meeting, however, should be to solicit the chief administrator's support and willingness to have special needs children in his/her program. The administrator's permission to work directly with the appropriate staff should be obtained.

STEP IV. ARRANGE VISITS TO POTENTIAL SITES

Selecting the most appropriate program from all available options requires input from as many members of the transdisciplinary team as possible. Each site should be visited by at least one special education administrator, one teacher or therapist and parent(s). Inclusion of parents during this initial planning stage increases parental understanding, cooperation and long-term involvement.

The visit should yield information on the following:

1. size of enrollment
2. length of day
3. degree of program structure
4. type of curriculum
5. behavior expectations
6. general atmosphere

In addition, the physical lay-out of the building needs to be scrutinized for possible barriers and for necessary modifications such as rails and ramps. This information should then be shared with the remaining team members and viewed jointly in relation to the child's needs.

STEP V. CONFERENCE WITH TEACHER(S) AT CHOSEN SITE

The present teacher, special education coordinator and therapist(s) should acquaint the receiving teacher with the child's specific strengths and weaknesses. The receiving teacher's readiness (and that of her staff) to meet the incoming child's needs can be assessed by direct questioning.

The following are sample questions and statements:

"Now that you've heard of Johnny's specific strengths and needs, what is your comfort level for working with him? In what area do you feel you or your staff could benefit from some additional training or assistance? We have several trained personnel ready to provide inservice training, demonstration teaching, behavior management suggestions or on-site consultation."

Providing adequate preparation for the new (receiving) teachers and assistants is a significant factor in successful mainstreaming. Making the new staff aware that training and consultation are available beyond the child's entry period helps allay anxieties.

STEP VI. SCHEDULE PARENT/TEACHER EXCHANGE AT SELECTED SITE

Having selected the most appropriate setting, the parent(s) should be invited to re-visit, accompanied by the special education coordinator and/or the child's present teacher. This visit presents an excellent opportunity for both parent(s) and receiving teacher to engage in a verbal exchange of their expectations, respectively. It is also a golden moment for the parent(s) to assure the new teacher of their support - the beginning of positive parent/teacher relations. Mutual respect and mutual support cannot be over-emphasized.

Establishing a positive working relationship with the receiving staff is vital at this stage of the preliminary process. Whether mainstreaming occurs as a resource teacher model or a classroom teacher model, reassurance of parental support to the teaching staff is crucial. It is important to let the receiving teacher know that he/she is not expected to make any major changes in classroom environment. Let the teacher know that he/she will receive assistance with incorporating the child's goals into the existing classroom program, with as few modifications as possible.

STEP VII. ASSESS READINESS OF CLASSROOM PEERS TO ACCEPT A HANDICAPPED CHILD

Information on peer readiness levels should be gained from the receiving teacher. If preparation steps are necessary, make suggestions to the teaching staff of stories or activities that the normal children can experience as vehicles to accepting differences. A keen observation is needed since too much preparation sometimes has negative results rather than the desired positive outcomes. The incoming child needs to feel welcomed by his peers as a new member of their group who just happens to look or do some things differently. Respect for individual uniqueness and recognition that everyone has strengths and needs can be incorporated into the regular curriculum units as an ongoing process.

STEP VIII. PROVIDE A TRAINING SCHEDULE

Having assessed the teaching staff's needs and those of her class, inservice training should be scheduled immediately. All preparation training should occur prior to the special needs child's first day in the program. The training schedule could include:

1. A tour of selected mainstreamed settings
2. Assistance with alternative scheduling of class/small group activities
3. Preparation of materials for the special needs child
4. Video and discussion on techniques for talking with parents of non-handicapped children about special needs children

STEP IX. ARRANGE A MEETING OF THE TRANSDISCIPLINARY TEAM

The receiving teacher is now a new member of the transdisciplinary team and should be made to feel that her input is valued. It is at this meeting that strategies for working the child's I.E.P. goals into the teacher's existing curriculum can be suggested and refined. Entry date into the program, length of day and frequency of attendance may need to be modified to insure a smooth transition for the child.

STEP X. SET UP AN ON-GOING CONSULTATION SYSTEM

A system for providing continued support to the teaching staff can also serve as a vehicle for monitoring the child's progress. Weekly or bi-monthly meetings between the resource teacher or special education consultant, therapists and teaching staff provide opportunities for feedback as to which techniques are successful and which are not. Roles and responsibilities also need to be continuously clarified. Periodic conferences with parents should be a component of this system. These weekly/monthly meetings constitute a joint evaluation process.

SUMMATION:

The ten basic preliminary steps may not all be applicable to some sites and agencies. Flexibility should be employed in both selection of the steps and in sequencing.

For information on additional mainstreaming products, send requests to Hampton Institute Mainstreaming Model, Hampton Institute, Hampton, Virginia 23668.