I Just Want to Know: Helping Children Express Their Curiosity About Others with Disabilities

Gain insights about the reasons behind young children's comments concerning children with disabilities and discover tools to prepare yourself to handle these situations more effectively.

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Many new teachers are concerned with how to respond appropriately when preschoolers make statements that can be considered rude, hurtful, or socially inappropriate. This is particularly true for comments related to children with disabilities (Diamond & Hong, 2010). New teachers are often afraid that negative and unkind comments will be made by young children in their classrooms. If this occurs, the teacher may be petrified, not respond, or respond in a manner that makes the situation worse (Twyman et. al, 2010).

The purpose of this article is to offer insight about the reasons behind young children's comments concerning others with disabilities in the inclusive classroom environment. Moreover, this article will provide new teachers with tools to prepare themselves to handle these situations more effectively. When teachers expect comments and are prepared to respond to such comments, the situations tend to be less intense. As a result, both teachers and children benefit from the interchange.

Be Informed and Prepared

As a teacher in an inclusive public school setting, you will have students with disabilities (Buysse, Goldman, & Skinner, 2002). Knowing in advance who to expect, the specific needs of the child, and the classroom's accommodations will help you prepare to respond to children's comments and questions. You can reflect on what are the most likely things to be asked by children such as:

- *"How did she get to be in a wheel chair?"*
- *"What is that thing behind his ears?"*
- *"Why are your glasses so thick?"*
- *"Why do they talk funny?"*
- *"Why does that thing (hearing aid) make that noise?"*

Young children are curious and often make remarks about a disability simply because it is new and novel: this occurs in classrooms when young children have not previously been exposed to individuals with disabilities (Diamond & Tu, 2009).

> ***Young children may be afraid of children with disabilities.***

As children are exposed to children who use wheelchairs, hearing aids, or use other adaptive equipment and devices, they begin to recognize the equipment as tools to assist the child. When children become familiar with individuals with disabilities (Krahe´ & Altwasser, 2006) and children with challenging behaviors, they perceive them as part of their group and as typical, rather than different. These characteristics will no longer be noticeable but common in the child's environment.

Another reason for young children's comments is fear for themselves and of the child with disabilities. They may believe the physical, social, emotional manifestations of the disability are contagious or brought on by not following adult requests. Children may also be afraid that they will make the situation worse by getting closer or playing with children with disabilities. Teachers can help alleviate this fear by explaining how disabilities occur (Buysse, Goldman, & Skinner, 2002). Of course,

Photo courtesy of BB International Preschool, Pompano Beach, FL

Outdoor learning spaces can accommodate children with disabilities by creating structures such as this raised gardening bed.

this information needs to be stated at the child's developmental level and explained in basic terms easily understood by young children. For example, a child may say *"She/he is walking funny."* when they see a child with orthopedic impairments. At this point teachers will have to redirect the comments and state that the child has difficulties walking due to a physical condition.

When a child is in a wheel chair, with or without breathing support, children might stare and show fear of the child. Talk to the children and explain how the equipment works, that they should not touch such equipment and give simple explanations as to possible causes such as illness and/or accidents.

Lastly, children make comments because they are children. Preschool children are developing social skills and usually say what they think. Children may stare or avoid children or individuals with disabilities because they do not know how to cope with the feelings that the situation might bring up for them (Diamond & Hong, 2010). The teacher should recognize the situation and intervene by helping the young child learn to ask appropriate questions related to the child with a disability (Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2000). Learning to ask questions about unfamiliar situations is conducive to both social and emotional growth.

Answer Children's Questions

Young children tend to ask questions that are concrete and related to practical things, such as *"Can they play with me?"* and *"If they play with me, will I be like them?"* Many young children shy away from children with disabilities because they are afraid they might break the equipment or make the children's issues worse. Talking with children and explaining that the child with a disability can play and do most of the things others kids can do may be sufficient (Buysse, Goldman, & Skinner, 2002). It is also helpful to have well-prepared answers concerning how disabilities occur. For example, some children have problems at birth but later may develop typically: other children have had an injury that led to short- or long-term disability. Comments like these are generally sufficient to satisfy young children's curiosity.

In addition, prepare the child with a disability (Milsom, 2006). Most young children have apprehension and fear of unfamiliar environments and situations. Anticipate the child's questions and concerns, including fear of other children's reactions. Help him or her prepare responses. For example, if a child who uses a hearing aid notices children looking at the device, encourage him or her to tell other children how the hearing aid works. Also, when children first enter the group, encourage all children to talk about their families, what they can do, and what assistance they may need. Empower all children to talk about their individual strengths and limitations.

Recognize your own biases and address personal issues (Buysse, Goldman, & Skinner, 2002). You do not have to agree with various segments of society, but your personal views should not undermine a child's sense of self or their family. Be professional, open, and accepting to all students, their families, and the complexities presented. Children are very perceptive and may recognize when adults are stating something they do not believe. When children feel safe and secure, their focus is on learning and social growth -- your goal for them.

Prepare the Environment

Be proactive and include literature about children with disabilities in the classroom library. Reading appropriate books provides opportunities to discuss differences and respond appropriately (Milsom, 2006). While reading, teachers can ask questions about how children with disabilities feel, what they may like, what they may need. Also, teachers and children can role-play ways to ask children with disabilities to play with them. Other discussions include what is a friend and how

to be a friend, and similarities and differences between young children, both with and without disabilities.

Another way to familiarize children is to post pictures of children in wheel chairs, with hearing aids, and/or with mobility equipment, even if no children with disabilities are enrolled in the class. Presenting these pictures may facilitate an open conversation about children with disabilities and help prepare children for future situations. Familiarity through pictures is an excellent way to teach inclusion and acceptance (Han, Ostrosky, & Diamond, 2006). Teachers must remember, however, that not all disabilities are physical so including other types of disabilities that may not be visible is of great importance and benefit for children to develop empathy for others.

Photo courtesy of Dora L. Lewis Family & Child Development Center, Richmond, VA

Including children with disabilities in a regular classroom can provide rich learning opportunities for all children.

Prepare Parents

Teachers in early childhood programs should consult with parents about ways to accommodate and address their children's disabilities in the classroom (Macdonald & Callery, 2008). Be aware that parents may not have a specific answer. Inform parents that some children may have questions and discuss how you plan to respond. This conversation may be difficult for parents who are unaccustomed to the early childhood classroom environment, so reassure them that you want all children to feel comfortable in the classroom. Emphasize the fact that young children may not have been exposed to children with disabilities and creating a plan of action will promote their children's acceptance in the classroom. Many parents have faced the situation of other children staring or making comments and recognize that interventions need to be put in place (Macdonald & Callery, 2008). Parents can tell you how their children respond and the information they are comfortable disclosing. Parents may suggest books or toys they use to talk with siblings about the disability. Some parents have prepared their child with a disability to respond to questions and curiosity by showing how their equipment works or saying what they can do and what assistance they may need.

Have well-prepared responses to common questions.

If parents do not offer suggestions, present some statements you have prepared and encourage them to respond to those statements. Remember your role as teacher is to dispel myths and misinformation and to create a classroom climate of acceptance and inclusion (Buysse, Goldman, & Skinner, 2002).

Prepare the Children

Teachers need to prepare all children, those with and without disabilities. While it is essential to talk about children with disabilities when they enroll in the class, this is not sufficient (Han, Ostrosky, & Diamond, 2006). Begin conversations with children about disabilities even if there is no one in the classroom with a disability (there may be children with a disability in other classrooms). Dispelling myths and addressing causes of disabilities is important to help children understand how certain disabilities occur; this helps children avoid fear or surprise when they see peers or adults with disabilities (Hallberg, 2013).

Be consistent in language when referring to any child who is different from other enrolled children, regardless of the nature of the difference. Children may make inappropriate comments. Address the situations

and offer an alternative message such as

- *"This is what we say."*
- *"Saying things like this can hurt other people's feelings."*
- *"Do you want to know more about what he/she can do?"*

Try to discern what the question or the comment is really about and respond accurately, appropriately and on the child's developmental level. Remember that young children may not be clear in their questions or comments. Listening carefully can help you avoid giving a wrong answer and not responding to the child's underlying need for understanding.

For example, children with Tourette's syndrome often have tics, make sounds, and repeat words that may seem hurtful, funny, or out of context. These inappropriate words may include profanity (Marsh, 2007). Often youth with Tourette syndrome are noticed by their peers because of their tics and/or vocalizations and ridiculed (Topolski, 2014). Behaviors of children with Tourette's syndrome may be perceived by their peers as amusing or funny. It is inappropriate to allow other children to mimic this uncontrolled behavior, laugh at the behavior, or call him/her names.

If inappropriate behavior such as name-calling occurs, the teacher and parent can talk to the children about Tourette syndrome. Provide simple explanations or use books that present the condition in simple terms easily understood by children, such as *Why Do You Do That?: A Book About Tourette Syndrome for Children and Young People* (Chowdhur & Robertson, 2006).

Another event that may catch children's attention is an epileptic seizure. The child with the seizure may collapse, experience violent jerks, and make gasping noises. This event can be frightening for other children and they may be unaware of how to react or behave. After a seizure episode children may make hurtful comments such as *"You were foaming at the mouth like a dog."* Teachers can talk to the entire classroom after an epileptic seizure occurs. Allow the children to express their feelings and talk about what to do if the event happens again and the teacher/caregiver is not right by the convulsing child's side. Make it a two-steps process -- first, get the teacher and then move chairs, furniture, and other objects out of the child's way. Reading books such as *"Taking Seizure Disorders to School: A Story About Epilepsy"* by Kim Gosselin, or *"The Why and What of Epilepsy: A Book for Children and Teens"* by Roopal Karia, can help children realize that this is a physical condition and that negative remarks will not be accepted. This talk can be done through "class meetings" or "group talks" about disabilities into the weekly curriculum (Corbett, 2001) to present children with accurate information and to give opportunities to role-play positive responses to peers.

Children and adults with low vision or blindness may navigate through society with the use of a walking stick or a guide dog. Guide dogs and other service dogs are usually large friendly animals and attract children's attention. However, children who are afraid of dogs may insist that the dog leave or may even try to chase the dog away. Other children may want to pet and play with the dog. Explain to children that these are working dogs with an important job to do and therefore should not be distracted with petting or playing (Citizen Reporter, 2008). Talking about service dogs is an excellent way to teach children about ways dogs work with and for people. Consider starting the discussion after seeing the National Geographic series *"Dogs with Jobs"* and talking about the many roles dogs play in our lives. Talk with children and encourage them to ask questions about the dog's work and the owner's disability.

Photo by Elisabeth Nichols

Books about children with disabilities provide opportunities to discuss differences.

Young children often model a teacher's responses and may begin to correct parents and other individuals at home (Buysse, Goldman, & Skinner, 2002). When children are provided the appropriate dialogue they will use it, especially if appropriately reinforced by teachers, parents, administrators, and peers (Taub, 2006). This response training should be continual and address all areas of diversity.

Prepare the child with a disability to enter your classroom.

Conclusion

Public schools reflect the diversity of society, and the key for successfully reducing unwelcome and unkind comments about children with disabilities is preparation. Teachers can prepare themselves, the environment, the parents, and children so when situations arise, the implementation of proper strategies is effortless. Teachers should become familiar with the disabilities that their children are exposed to in the school so they can anticipate the kinds of questions the children may ask.

In addition, there should be a clear understanding by parents that this preparation is for the benefit of all children and is designed to facilitate a classroom climate of acceptance. The common goal for teachers and parents should be to give every child an opportunity for understanding and accepting one another.

The following is a chart that could be used as a tool when trying to address preschoolers' comments about individuals with disabilities. Remember that being prepared helps you deal with any children's indiscretions and/or curiosity questions with ease.

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Prepare yourself	Prepare the environment	Prepare parents	Prepare the children
• Be open and accepting of all types of families • Use proactive language • Be consistent • Research various disabilities • Listen to the recommendations from parents	• Compile an inclusive classroom library of children's books about disabilities • Display pictures of children with disabilities • Anticipate children's comments • Prepare responses to commonly asked questions • Dispel myths and misinformation	• Reach out to parents early in the school year • Be supportive of the family • Communicate often with parents • Convey the importance of an inclusive classroom environment • Ask for suggestions on what to disclose to classmates	• Teach children about their disability • Teach children to ask for help • Teach children to advocate for themselves • Promote social growth and acceptance among children

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Nancy P. Alexander is Executive Director of Northwestern State University Child and Family Network in Shreveport, Louisiana. She has a Master's Degree from Northwestern and additional graduate hours in adult learning and early childhood education. Her work involves staff in their roles of helping program directors and teachers implement ongoing improvement. She is the author of two books, *Early Childhood Workshops that Work: The Essential Guide to Successful Training and Workshops,* and *Nailing Jelly to the Wall: Defining and Providing Technical Assistance in Early Childhood*, both published by Gryphon House.

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