

Play and Relationships: Programming for Inclusion

by Anne Carr

About five years ago I attended a conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico where Rebecca Fewell, who developed an assessment scale especially designed to evaluate play behaviour of young children, opened her workshop to a multi-disciplinary audience with the question: "How do we want young children to be spending their time?" A pause...then several responded, "Play!" "Ah, ha!" she said. "And how come young children with special needs are working all the time? You make them work on their fine motor skills, their large muscle development, their intellectual functioning ..." There was silence.

For me, this validated so much of the work Cathleen Smith and I had been doing on the video series, *Making Friends*. The development of positive social skills is critical to the successful inclusion of children who require extra support in community-based settings (Guralnick, 1993). Programming for small or large projects can be a vital key for social inclusion.

A current review of the literature readily suggests that the focus has shifted from an emphasis on the cognitive competence of children with special needs to a concern for social development. Despite the good intentions of inclusion, however, mere exposure to age-appropriate activities and to peers is no guarantee that children with special needs will enjoy increased involvement and interactions with peers. As early childhood educators, we intuitively grasp that our cherished Piagetian approach (free discovery through play with occasional guiding from us) does not work for every child. For some children, special programming strategies are necessary to increase interaction and promote play opportunities and social skill development. (Cook, Tessier, Klein, 1996; Guralnick, 1996).

Here are four examples of how early childhood educators can help children with special needs participate fully.

Hailey

In this example, teachers observe what a child with special needs enjoys and does well and then plan programming to interest all the children in the program.

Hailey, a child with large and fine motor challenges due to cerebral palsy, demonstrated great interest in drawing, painting and gluing with adapted crayons and brushes. Her occupational therapist had provided relevant materials to enable these therapeutic adaptations. Since it was nearing Christmas and the children in Hailey's preschool class were most interested in mailing and receiving cards, the teachers and a group of children decided to visit a local post office.

On return to the preschool, the teachers listened as the children recounted their post office experiences and then asked questions to elicit more information about what interested and intrigued them. The children wanted to set up a post office of their own. The teachers responded to the children's requests for an adding machine, computer and service window and enabled them to build their representation of a post office. Through the teaching strategy of support, the children actively took ownership in planning the construction and evaluating the various project components. In the process, many challenges needed to be solved mutually. (For example, how to cut a large window, where to put the adding machine, what kinds of stamps would be used, who would design them and how would they stick on parcels, letters and cards.)

The teachers and Hailey's therapist made minor prop adaptations so that she could be physically included in the play. Teachers adjusted the post office seating so that Hailey could crawl to and pull herself up into it. Sometimes teachers modelled verbal, gestural or action scripts to coach Hailey and the others in the play. For example, Hailey had brought a stuffed animal she wanted to mail to the local hospital. Following a discussion about weight, cost and a need for weigh scales, a teacher helped the children design a poster for parents requesting weigh scales. The children drew pictures of the stuffed animal and took pictures of it. As scribe and broadcaster, the teacher wrote down the words that the children dictated to her. When the weigh scales arrived the next morning, a teacher demonstrated their use and involved the children in the weighing and mailing process.

This post office play is an example of what Sylvia Chard and Lillian Katz would describe as play that is possible for children of very different abilities, prior experience and levels of interest to embrace at different levels of involvement. Reggio Emilia proponent Rebecca New would likely see it as a project representing not only the children's interests, but also one in which teachers proactively provoke more in-depth, long-term study and exploration.

Heather

This example accentuates the importance of environmental structuring and peer mediation in facilitating social relationships to support the inclusion of children with autism or autistic-type behaviours.

Heather hangs up her coat and enters the purposefully designed and arranged preschool room. Barely noticing the other children near her, she grabs at a carousel toy that's going 'round and 'round. She abruptly stops and spins around to grab a felt pen from a low shelf. She holds it close to her nose, sniffs it and sticks out her tongue as if to taste, but monitors herself as a teacher invites her to bring the pen to the table where there is paper. Instead, she places the top on the felt pen and moves toward the covered water tray. The teacher touches her shoulder gently, gains her attention as she signs and says, "Would you like to play with the water?" Heather does not verbally respond or sign but does give very brief eye contact to the teacher as they both begin to lift the cover from the water table. Soon other children come to the water table and stand near Heather. It is a small table and she plays beside them, very occasionally glancing around. When she tries to grab the water wheel, another child (Jeannie) says, "Do you want the water wheel, Heather?" She asks the question twice and when Heather finally nods, Jeannie gives her the water wheel.

Heather has been diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorder and her peer, Jeannie, has been willingly placed by her parents in a program specially designed to socially include young children with autism or autistic-like behaviours.

In this preschool program south of Vancouver and designed in the LEAP model (Kohler and Strain, 1993), three of the 12 children have autism. As well as providing materials appropriate to the skills or interactions desired, many of the activities are deliberately carried out in close proximity to increase the probability of interaction. Much of the equipment and activities require cooperation. Sometimes having noticed a child's interest in playing with sticks, the teacher will expand that activity so that other children will participate in stick building with that child. Routines also offer many opportunities for helping each other (for example, with dressing). Transitions such as putting on coats and clearing away one activity before another begins are especially difficult for children with communication-behavioural challenges. At the LEAP Program, these are designated by a familiar song, signing, gesturing and visual cues. Everyone participates in whatever adapted way is necessary. It may be with peer mediation, peer modelling, teacher support or demonstration. Teachers have developed social inclusion strategies based on their observations of the children's needs in the context of developmentally appropriate programming.

Cathy

*This example from the video series **Young and Special** is about "attitude" -- understanding facts that affect feelings that in turn affect action. Attitude is at the heart of inclusion for children and adults. It has three components: knowledge, emotional response and understanding.*

Cathy is a preschooler who is blind because she received too much oxygen when she was a very tiny baby in an incubator. Some of the children were suspicious of her and teased her because they thought her blindness was caused by watching too much television.

As soon as it became known that the children's teasing behaviour was the result of lack of knowledge, Cathy's mother and teacher worked to facilitate the inclusion process. They helped her explain her disability to her preschool friends so that they could appreciate her difference and include her in their play. As a result, the children came up with their own ways to adapt the play to include Cathy. For example, they agreed that Cathy should be allowed to keep one hand on the chairs when they were playing musical chairs (because she couldn't see) but not two hands (because that wouldn't be fair).

Bradley

This example illustrates what a high quality inclusive play setting looks like. Teachers seek ways to provide play opportunities that relate to the children's experiences and help them move beyond their current levels of play through a process known as "scaffolding" (Berk and Winsler, 1995).

Bradley rides up to the lemonade stand on a hobby horse and gestures to the teacher to come over. Kneeling down, the teacher positions herself so that she is facing a group of three girls in the lemonade stand as well as Bradley. He signs to the teacher and she reminds him to ask for a ticket. As he goes through the process of gesture and sign with the lemonade sellers, the teacher scaffolds his communication with the other children by checking his request and prompting their responses. Suddenly Bradley scrunches up his face. The teacher describes his facial reaction to the sour drink. Everybody laughs. Bradley signs, "Thank you" and the girl who has poured the drink says, "You're welcome!"

Tasting new flavours is fairly new to Bradley because he breathes through a tracheotomy tube and receives his primary nourishment through a jejunostomy tube. The goal of introducing Bradley to new foods is easily incorporated into the play cooking activities that are fascinating for all the children. Riding on the hobby horse is an activity that is meeting two other goals for Bradley: large muscle exercise and negotiation (who will sit up front when they ride in pairs).

Bradley often has dramatic play ideas and devises new gestures or combinations of signs to communicate these to the children. As the teachers interpret his self-created gestures, they are able to provide relevant props. The props, in turn, enhance his initiation and negotiation of the play theme since these props are signs to the other children of his intentions.

When Bradley started at preschool, his father brought a doll that was equipped with a tracheotomy tube and a J-tube. The specialists at the hospital offered this for concrete explanations of Bradley's medical needs. Although introduced at circle time, the doll was cursorily viewed and touched but virtually never played with. Bradley's teachers reported that during the first few weeks the other children observed Bradley often, never shunning his involvement, but rather observing teachers' actions and words. Occasionally, a question would arise. Usually it was, "Where's Bradley today?"; very occasionally, "What's Bradley saying?"; never, "What's the matter with him?"

I'd like to conclude with the following image. It's 11:35 am. Preschool finished for the morning five minutes ago. Efficiently, Sue (Bradley's medical support person) has prepared his jejunostomy tube food. The set-up comes in a nifty back-pack to which Bradley is unobtrusively connected as he sits with a small group of children waiting for pick-up. They look at books, point, sign, gesture, smile and laugh.

Setting the Stage for Play

- **Observe, observe, observe...individual children as well as the group.** By appreciating the details of the children's play, making notes of a child's interests, accomplishments and frustrations you have what it takes to design developmentally appropriate programming for all your children. Take this information to your team. Check with parents. Consult with other professionals with whom you may be involved.
- **Check your toys and play materials.** Make sure you have equipment that is durable and offers possibilities for various levels of play. For example, children still engaging in a lot of practice play will need toys strong enough to accommodate repeated use. What extra resources can you access quickly and cost effectively to support young children's interests? Consider cardboard boxes, scales, dress-up clothes.
- **Review your program format** . Are there many transitions? If so, how involved are all the children? If everyone is not involved, put on your thinking caps. Do transitions require songs, signs, visual cues, peer mediation or demonstration?
- **Watch for opportunities to coach, support or facilitate for children.**
- **Spread the news of the play stories you observe** and share children's good ideas with others. Collect and display examples of children's activities through photos and their own creations.
- **Encourage children to access all modes of self-expression** by providing clay, paint and construction materials. Model uses of the materials guiding them to express their ideas.
- **Mediate for children by interpreting the meaning of their messages** to each other and by focusing on the content of the play rather than on any rule violations. Be a coach by encouraging the children to risk-take in your supportive presence.
- **Assist children to grow beyond their current competence** by indirect and direct strategies (for example, by providing clippers instead of scissors for Hailey, by translating and broadcasting Bradley's self-designed signs).

Anne Carr M.A. has worked with young children and families since 1970 and has taught ECE courses for the last 10 years. She produced the video series, *Making Friends*.

References

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Recommended Resources

Making Friends: Early Childhood Social Integration consists of three videos and a guidebook. Contact Anne Carr, Early Childhood Care and Education, Capilano College. Phone (604) 986-1911, ext. 2210.

Young and Special Video Series was produced in the 1980s and is currently distributed in Canada by Psycan Corporation (1-800-263-3558). It contains 30 videos, leader's guides, student materials and resource folders. A 30-minute preview video is available for \$20.00. Contact the media centre at your local community college.