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# Introduction

The ‘traditional’ classroom is a thing of the past. With special needs children being included or mainstreamed, our student population is more diverse than ever. Classrooms are in transition and adapted lessons are a must.

Adapting a curriculum to fit the needs of all students does not need to be an overwhelming task; however, it does take thought, preparation and some advanced work. When adapting lessons teachers need to think of creative and unique ways to teach specific skills. Teachers must take into consideration the wide variety of learning styles that all children possess. Using hands-on activities that involve a variety of senses is an effective way to reach and teach children.

Having a special needs child in the classroom might raise a few questions for the classroom teacher. Some questions include: ‘How can I teach a special needs child, when I am not a Special Education teacher? How can I make this a productive learning year for all my students? Will the other children adjust to the extra attention given to special needs students?’. These are all valid questions that teachers ask themselves. However, after a successful year of teaching an included classroom, teachers find that it is one of the most gratifying and growing years they have ever had. In an included classroom, each child has the opportunity to learn basic skills and to improve their social interaction. More importantly, students learn patience and tolerance while learning that they are all the same – they are all children eager to learn.

After a year of adapting lessons in her own classroom, the author of *Including the Special Needs Child* found that discovering new ways of teaching early learning skills became second nature. The fruits of her labour are included in these pages to help other teachers of inclusive classrooms.

# Attitude

Attitude is everything. How the teacher approaches parents and students in the class can influence how special needs children will be treated. At the first opportunity – *Open Day, Meet the Parents Night* or *Orientation Day* – a clear, positive message needs to be made. Parents want and need to know how the included classroom will affect their child. A presentation might contain some of the following information:

A classroom that is included with special needs children can be considered lucky. Students will have the opportunity to learn about unique differences among individuals.

Some years ago, special needs children were bussed to a special school. They were never integrated into a regular classroom and, therefore, never had the benefit of learning from classmates. Likewise, regular education children never learned how to communicate or respect others with differences. Children in an inclusive classroom have the advantage of learning tolerance, patience, understanding and caring for classmates who have learning problems. They have an opportunity to learn how to communicate with pictures and sign language; students learn to be positive role models for special needs students.

When children are introduced to anything new or different and it is treated as normal or routine, they accept and learn from the experiences. There are fewer preconceived ideas and biases that need to be tackled. Students will follow a parent's or a teacher's lead.

Some unusual tools, behaviours and apparatuses may be used in the classroom. Many new specialised teachers will come and go from the classroom daily. More attention may be given to individuals with special needs, but all students can learn from special services, when lessons are presented correctly. One of the most important aspects is making the whole class feel comfortable by permitting them to touch, explore and learn along with the special needs student.

Having a special needs child in the classroom does not mean that the regular education students will be neglected, ignored or passed over. All children will benefit from special needs teachers, activities and adapted materials.

It may also be necessary to educate parents and students about terms relating to special needs. Some of these terms include: Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Disorder, IEP, adaptations, occupational therapist, modified curriculum, multidisciplinary team or learning styles. A glossary of these terms may be found beginning on page 89.

# Classroom Strategies

It is easy to identify some differences between students from the minute they walk into the classroom. Teachers notice the colour of their hair, their eyes, whether they are noisy or quiet, and their size. Their abilities, weaknesses and learning styles are less evident. It will take some searching before a teacher can accurately define and develop strategies tailored to particular learning styles.

Different learning strategies can help children learn and understand new ideas and skills. By using strategies that appeal to different learning styles children can integrate new material into what they already know. Ideally, a teacher will use more than one style or strategy to introduce a new idea or skill. Learning strategies should be embedded into all lessons, leading children to be successful, independent learners. Some methods may work one day and not another. As the saying goes, 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try, again'.

Learning styles are usually divided into three types:

**Visual Learners:** A visual learner is one who learns and remembers information best by seeing the information. Visual learners study better in a clutter-free environment. They follow directions well in written or picture form. They use non-verbal communication and are observant of body language (facial, expression, posture, gestures). It is important that the teacher does not turn her back to the student when giving directions. Labelling objects in the classroom with words works well for visual learners.

**Auditory Learners:** An auditory learner is one who learns and remembers best by hearing the information. Auditory learners benefit from reading material out loud. They need a quiet place to study. Auditory learners find it easy to follow oral directions. They often have musical talent and are sensitive to tones, beats and rhythms. Lessons set to music, familiar tunes or rhymes work well for the auditory learner.

**Kinesthetic Learners:** A kinesthetic learner learns and remembers information best through hands-on activities. They often have a hard time sitting still for long periods of time. Legs, arms and hands are usually in motion. A hands-on approach works best for kinesthetic learners. For example: provide a mini-trampoline and let the child jump as he counts. Letters made from clay or sand paper also work well for the kinesthetic learner.

# Group Activities

Participating in group activities is an important developmental skill for a child. Learning to cooperate, share, take turns and how to be a good sport are all valuable lessons. Some students need more direction and encouragement than others when interacting with other children. Group activities on the following pages help foster important social skills.



# The Big Wind Blows

## Materials:

none

The children form a large circle with everyone sitting an arm's length apart. One person is chosen to be the 'wind'.

The chosen student stands in the middle of the circle and acts like the wind. She turns, move her arms, bobs up and down. Then she must say, 'The Big Wind Blows Someone who \_\_\_\_\_' and she fills in the blank with a specific trait (blue eyes, red hair, wearing black shoes, has a dog, etc.)

Any child who has these traits (as well as the person who is the wind) must run to an open space in the circle. When a player reaches an open spot he sits down. One person will be left; this player is now the wind.

# Stop the Ball

## Materials:

playground ball

Children stand in a circle, with legs apart, touching their neighbour. One person is in the middle holding the ball. This person tries to roll the ball out of the circle between the players legs. Children try to stop the ball with their hands. If a ball gets through a student's legs, then that student moves to the middle of the circle.

