

Why does Billy talk “funny”?

Why does Joan have braces on her legs?

James acts “retarded.”

Fostering Inclusive Values in Children: What Families Can Do

Spencer J. Salend

Family members play important roles in promoting the success of inclusion programs, including teaching their children to appreciate individual differences. Although children’s knowledge and acceptance of individual differences are influenced by their families, family members may be reluctant to address issues of individual differences with their children. This article presents guidelines that educators can employ to help family members take actions that show their acceptance of individual differences and foster inclusive values in their children. Even though these guidelines are presented in the context of families of young children without disabilities and individual differences related to disability, they can be used by all educators and families to foster an acceptance of all types of individual differences in all children.

Michael: Why does Joan have braces on her legs?

Michael’s mother: Many people use things to help them do things that are hard for them. Your father wears glasses to help him see and Joan wears braces to help her walk. What are some



things that you use to help you do things that are hard for you?

Melissa: Why does Billy talk “funny”?

Melissa’s father: It’s not funny. You mean you have difficulty understanding Billy. We all have different voices, and people are hard to understand for different reasons. Some people are hard to understand because they need more

time to learn to speak, or their mouth muscles are still growing. Remember when you were younger, you used to say “free” when you wanted to say “three.” What are some ways to help you understand Billy?

Brenda: James acts “retarded.”

Brenda’s grandmother: You just hurt James’s feelings. We don’t talk that way. If James did something you don’t like, tell him what he did that you don’t like. You need to think before you speak or act. What are you going to do to make sure it doesn’t happen again?

- What are good ways for family members to respond to these situations?
- How might these responses affect children’s understanding of individual differences?

As these situations indicate, children are curious about individual differences. Unfortunately, because of observational learning, societal influences, and the environment in which they are raised, many children learn stereotypic views about persons they perceive as different (Shapiro, 1999). Many children learn that individual differences have negative connotations, and so they often react to individuals with disabilities

with fear, pity, fascination, avoidance, and ridicule. These misconceptions and negative attitudes can limit social interactions and affect the success of inclusion programs (Salend, 2005).

Because children look up to adults, family members of children without disabilities can serve as role models for promoting an understanding and acceptance of individual differences, which can foster the success of inclusion programs. However, although many families support inclusion and recognize the importance of helping their children learn about and value individual differences (see box, "What Does the Literature Say?"), they often need assistance from educators in addressing issues of individual differences with their children (Tatum, 2000).

Respect and Ensure Confidentiality

When implementing the guidelines presented in this article, educators need to respect and ensure the confidentiality of students and their families. In addition to protecting students' and their families' right to privacy with respect to their records, confidentiality means that professionals and other individuals should refrain from

- * Revealing personally identifying information about students (e.g., their disability or immigration status, medical conditions and needs, test scores, etc.) and families to others.
- * Speaking or writing about students and families in public ways and places (e.g., teacher's room, meetings with other families, college classes, in-service sessions, etc.) that allow specific students to be identified.

If educators need to share information about one of their students with others not directly involved in delivering the student's educational program, they should specify the exact information about the student to be shared with others and obtain written permission from the student's family to share this information. In addition, teachers should collaborate with families and solicit their input and involvement in planning and implementing the activities outlined in this article.

What Does the Literature Say About the Attitudes Toward Inclusion of Families of Children Without Disabilities?

Several studies have explored the reactions and experiences of families of children without disabilities educated in inclusive educational programs (Garrick Duhane & Salend, 2000). Many family members thought that an inclusive classroom did not prevent their children from receiving a good education, appropriate services, and teacher attention. For most, inclusion also led to their children's improved feelings of self-worth related to helping others, an increased sense of personal development, and a greater tolerance of individual differences (Giangreco, Edelman, Cloninger, & Dennis, 1993; Hanson et al., 2001; Hunt, Hirose-Hatae, Doering, Karasoff & Goetz, 2000). Family members also believed that inclusion benefited children with disabilities because it promoted their acceptance, improved their self-concept, and exposed them to the real world (Hunt et al., 2000; Staub et al., 1994).

Some family members initially had doubts about inclusion. They were concerned about the effectiveness of the instruction, whether their children would receive less teacher attention, and whether their children would pick up inappropriate behaviors sometimes exhibited by children with disabilities (Reichart et al., 1989). However, they found that their fears of inappropriate behaviors were not realized (Peck, Carlson, & Helmstetter, 1992). In general, family members expressed less concern about their children being educated with children having physical and sensory disabilities than about inclusion with children having severe disabilities and children having behavior disorders (Green & Stoneman, 1989).

Help Families Learn About Disabilities

Many family members may not be comfortable addressing issues of indi-

vidual differences with their children because of their unfamiliarity with information about specific disabilities. Therefore, teachers can provide families with general information related to the issues, characteristics, challenges, and accommodations associated with various disability conditions. This information can be shared with families through presentations, print materials, multimedia, role-plays, disability simulations, and Internet Web sites (Salend, 2005). In presenting this information, educators should take care not to violate confidentiality and should refrain from using examples or presenting information related to individual students unless they have the permission of the students' families. They also can remind family members that they need to be mindful of confidentiality when interacting with others.

Inviting individuals with disabilities to speak to families about their experiences can be a particularly effective way of helping families learn how environments and societal attitudes create and affect a person's disability status (Calloway, 1999; Hartwell, 2001). Therefore, important considerations when using guest speakers include carefully identifying, selecting, and preparing them, as well as determining whether the use of several speakers at

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the same time is appropriate (Shapiro, 1999). Potential guest speakers can be identified by contacting local community agencies, professional and advocacy organizations, and special educators. A meeting with potential speakers is helpful to determine the relevance and appropriateness of inviting them to speak by considering whether they can

- Present their independent lives in a positive light and foster positive attitudes.
- Speak in an open and honest way.
- Use language that families can understand.
- Share meaningful stories and examples.

Once a speaker has been selected, teachers can meet with the individual to discuss the goals of the presentation and possible topics to be covered. Speakers may want to address such topics as the difficulties they encounter now, as well as those they experienced when they were the children's age; school and childhood experiences; hobbies and interests; family; jobs; a typical day; future plans; causes of their disability; ways to prevent their disability (if possible); ways of interacting with others; and accommodations they need and assistive devices they use. To ensure that the school and classroom are accessible and set up appropriately, teachers should discuss with speakers the materials they may need and the accommodations and assistive devices they require. In addition, teachers should confirm dates and times and ensure that speakers have appropriate parking and transportation to and from school.

Individual students with disabilities and their family members (with the permission of the student) can share information about the characteristics of the disability and the child's needs (Pivik, McComas, & Laflamme, 2002). They can use home videos, photographs, and items that reveal important information about the child's strengths, interests, hobbies, and needs. They also can address the accommodations needed and assistive devices used, as well as questions raised by families. For example, a child who uses a wheelchair and the child's family can explain how the chair works, as well as when and how to push someone in it (Shapiro, 1999).

Offer Families Information About Inclusion

Families can benefit from receiving information that helps them understand inclusion and specific aspects of inclusion programs. Therefore, teachers can

discuss important aspects of their inclusion programs, such as

- The program's philosophy and goals.
- The professionals who work in the program.
- The day's schedule.
- The roles of families.

In addition, teachers can briefly explain the research on inclusion in language that families can understand, and cite examples of how their students have grown, socially as well as academically, without breaching their confidentiality. Similarly, family members of former students with and without disabilities can be invited to speak about the program and its impact on their children.



Provide Families With Guidelines for Fostering Acceptance of Individual Differences

One helpful approach for teachers is to provide families with general guidelines for fostering acceptance of individual differences (See Figure 1). These guidelines can be explained and discussed with families to give them a framework for interacting with children in ways that show they are comfortable with individual differences. The guidelines can be used to help families create an environment that values individual differences and focuses on children's competence, strengths, and similarities rather than their deficits and differences.

Provide Families With Inclusive Strategies

Although many family members have positive attitudes toward individual dif-

ferences (Garrick, Duhaney, & Salend, 2000), they may need assistance in understanding ways to communicate with children, in showing their acceptance of individual differences and in supporting inclusion programs. Specifically, teachers can share with families strategies for using language and for engaging in behaviors that clearly communicate how they think, feel, and act regarding individual differences and inclusion (Salend, 2005; Smith, Salend, & Ryan, 2001). These strategies, which follow, can help families take actions to foster inclusive values in their children.

Focus on the individual, and acknowledge individual differences when they are relevant to the situation. Family members can be encouraged to use individuals-first language, which focuses on the child rather than on their individual differences. For example, referring to children with cerebral palsy as the "CP kids" sets them apart and objectifies them. Families can remind their child to refer to other children by their names rather than use nicknames for those with unusual names, which also can make children feel different.

Although family members should focus on the individual, acknowledging the individual differences of children

Teachers can briefly explain the research on inclusion in language that families can understand.

when these differences are relevant to the situation is important. Ignoring the individual differences means not acknowledging important aspects of who children are, how they define themselves, and how they experience the world. For example, rather than ignore Joan's leg braces, families should understand the importance of acknowledging them as an aspect of how she experiences the world.

Figure 1. Guidelines for Fostering Acceptance of Individual Differences

- Act in ways that communicate the belief that *all* individuals have unique characteristics, preferences, strengths, and challenges.
- Establish the belief that commonalities, diversity, and individual differences are beneficial and make individuals unique.
- Help individuals understand that their similarities unite them.
- Promote sensitivity and avoid sympathy.
- Foster frequent social interactions and on-going relationships, in which children view each other as equal in status.
- Share relevant and believable information and deal with issues and questions in a truthful and objective manner.
- Relate information and situations to children's real life experiences.
- Respect the individuality and independence of all children.
- Offer experiences that counter stereotypes associated with individual differences.

Sources: Salend (2005) and Shapiro (1999)

Note the similarities among children. Family members can be encouraged to take opportunities to acknowledge the ways in which children are similar. For example, when children are interacting, their similarities can be made explicit (e.g., "You both like pizza and playing with blocks").

Describe children in positive and meaningful ways. Family members can offer positive descriptions of children related to their abilities and progress. They can describe children in terms of what they can do or who they are, rather than what they cannot do or who they are not. They can avoid the use of such terms as "cripple," "invalid," "victim of," "confined to a wheelchair," "normal," or "able-bodied," because these terms are associated with sympathy and suffering or being or having bodies that are abnormal. For example, in responding to Melissa's question, her father noted that the question really related to Melissa's understanding Billy's speech rather than to Billy's talking "funny," and he proceeded to encourage Melissa to find other ways to understand Billy.

Speak directly to children in age-appropriate ways. Family members can be reminded of the importance of talking directly to all children in age-appropriate language and about age-appropri-

ate topics. For example, the use of baby-talk tones when speaking to a child with disabilities may communicate to others that that child is not like them.

Answer questions honestly and directly, and relate them to the child's experiences. Family members can learn to respond to questions about disabilities honestly and directly and to relate answers to the child's experiences. For example, the adults responded to the questions at the beginning of this article by relating the answer to Michael's father's use of glasses, and to similar events in Melissa's life. Also helpful is giving children strategies for understanding and interacting with others, as Melissa's father did in encouraging her to find ways to understand Billy, and as Brenda's grandmother did when she prompted Brenda to tell James what he had done that she did not like.

Respect children and their independence. Family members can treat all children and adults in respectful ways and discuss what that respect means. They can offer all children assistance only when necessary, and refrain from placing them in embarrassing situations. For example, rather than assume that a child who uses a wheelchair needs to be pushed, family members can tell all children to let them know if they need assistance.

Foster social interactions. Family members can be taught ways to structure social activities so that all children interact with one another, and to comment positively when children interact appropriately. For example, teachers can give family members a list of simple, noncompetitive, enjoyable games that do not require a lot of skill or language abilities. Similarly, family members can be made aware of ways to acknowledge children when they are playing collaboratively.

Teach the social skills for interacting with others. Family members can teach children and model for them how to initiate, respond to, and maintain positive, equal-status social interactions with their peers, as well as how to show empathy and to deal with frustration, conflict, rejection, and refusal. For example, family members can model and have children role-play responses to various friendship-making situations. Elksnin and Elksnin (2000) offer techniques that teachers can share with families to help them teach social skills to their children.

Have age and disability-appropriate toys available. Family members can

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provide all children with toys that depict disabilities and are suitable for use by children with disabilities. For example, all children can play with figures that have prosthetic limbs, hearing aids, and eyeglasses. Information and resources related to toys and play-related interactions for children with disabilities can be obtained by contacting The National Lekotek Center (www.lekotek.org), Dragonfly Toy Company ([TEACHING EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN ■ SEPT/OCT 2004 ■ 67](http://www.dragon-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

flytoys.com), Enabling Devices (www.enablingdevices.com), and TFH Corporation (www.tfhusa.com).

Teach children how to communicate with peers with disabilities. Family members can be given information that helps children learn how to communicate in alternative ways with children with disabilities. For example, family members can be taught about the use of communication boards and other assistive technology that children use to communicate.

Understand and try to address accessibility issues. Family members can schedule play times in the homes of all children. Beforehand, families of children without disabilities can talk to the families of children with disabilities to understand an individual child's interests, strengths, and challenges. Information should be gathered in advance of the play date to make sure the home is accessible for the visiting child.

Use children's books about individuals with disabilities and related issues. Family members can share information about disabilities with children by exposing them to age-appropriate books about disabilities and individual differences (Dyches & Burrow, 2003). These books should be screened to make sure that they present accurate and nonstereotypical information. For example, *It's Okay to Be Different* (Parr, 2001) is a children's book that makes the point that all people are similar and different in some ways, and that certain things are easy for some people and hard for others. For information about children's books dealing with individuals with disabilities, go to the Web sites for the Special Needs Project (www.specialneeds.com), Woodbine House (www.woodbinehouse.com), Albert Whitman and Company (www.ahitmanco.com), Magination Press (www.maginationpress.com), and Roots and Wings (www.rootsandwingscatalog.com).

Use the Internet. Teachers can give family members addresses for Web sites that offer activities for teaching children about disabilities. For example, the American Foundation for the Blind has created Braille Bug (www.afb.org/

Family members can teach children ...how to show empathy, and deal with frustration, conflict, rejection, and refusal.

braillebug), a Web site that offers a variety of online activities to teach others about Braille.

Use adults with disabilities as resources. Family members can be encouraged to use individuals with disabilities as resources for sharing information about their disabilities and their experiences as children growing up with disabilities. For example, if children have questions about disabilities, they can be encouraged to ask their questions of a person with a disability.

Critique stereotypical portrayals of individuals with disabilities. Family members can counter the negative portrayals of individuals with disabilities in the media. For example, family members can critique negative depictions of individuals with disabilities in the cartoons with their children, and help them understand how such depictions are inaccurate and inappropriate.

Address situations in which children behave inappropriately and hurt the feelings of others. Family members can respond quickly to insensitive behavior so that all children understand that hurtful comments and actions are not acceptable. For example, when Brenda's grandmother heard Brenda make a negative comment about James, she told Brenda, "You just hurt James's feelings. We don't talk that way. If James did something you don't like, tell him what he did that you don't like. You need to think before you speak or act. What are you going to do to make sure it doesn't happen again?"

Encourage Family Members to Collaborate With Others

Family members can foster an appreciation of inclusion and disability in their children by collaborating with others to promote awareness and take actions to support the acceptance and inclusion of

individuals with disabilities in their communities. Family members can work with others (e.g., disability rights groups) to examine the accessibility of their communities; lobby legislators, businesses, and community groups for funds to adapt recreational areas for use by individuals with disabilities; and plan events that raise the awareness of others about individual differences. They also can encourage the community to sponsor programs for teaching sensitivity to, and an awareness and understanding of, disabilities. For example, the Kids on the Block (www.kotb.com) offers puppet shows involving life-sized puppets representing children with disabilities in real-life situations. The vignettes encourage the audience to explore their feelings toward individuals with disabilities and to ask questions about persons with specific disabilities.

Final Thoughts

Family members play important roles in promoting the success of inclusion programs (Garrick Duhaney & Salend, 2000). One role is serving as a role model to teach their children to appreciate diversity and to value and learn from similarities and differences of others. Although children's knowledge and

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acceptance of individual differences are influenced by their families, family members may be reluctant to address issues of individual differences with their children. Educators can employ the guidelines presented in this article to help family members take actions that show their acceptance of individual differences and foster inclusive values in their children. In applying these guidelines, important considerations include working collaboratively with

family members and protecting the confidentiality of students and families. By sharing their inclusive values with, and modeling appropriate adaptations and attitudes for the families of all their students, educators can bring the realization of a fully inclusive society closer to reality.

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