

Making Integration Work

As parents of young children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), one of your main concerns is school placement. Depending on where you live, you may have the choice of several placements or be faced with creating your own.

One of the biggest obstacles you must overcome is **fear**. School staff (teachers and administrators) may have had experience with only extremely challenged individuals within the autism spectrum. They may be afraid that they cannot provide for the educational needs of your child, or that accepting your child into their classroom would disrupt the learning of non-disabled students (maybe they are picturing constant screaming, tantruming and isolated rocking or self-abuse). You can counteract this by education. Bring your child in to meet the teacher. Provide video records of your child in a setting where (s)he is comfortable and showing his/her strengths. Provide general introductory written information about ASD. Obtain the services of a qualified professional to give more detailed information specific to your child (strengths and weaknesses, appropriate goals, necessary adaptations to the curriculum) - this support needs to be on-going so that questions and concerns can be addressed as they arise.

Minimum Supports Necessary for Successful Integration:

1. **Team approach** where "team" means parents, teachers, educational assistants, support personnel (eg. speech-language pathologists, psychologists, occupational therapists, etc), and administrators. Each team member brings a different and valuable perspective to collaborative problem-solving and development of an effective school program for your child. Some of these people will exist in your school system, some you may need to bring in. Everyone needs to be on the same side and believe in the value of the integration process. If you have had a legal battle or otherwise adversarial start to school entry, you may have an uphill battle. It is to your and your child's advantage to use a "kid glove" rather than an "iron fist" approach when seeking integrated placements. Regular on-going communication between team members is also necessary to keep your child's program on track - this includes frequent informal contact as well as less frequent formal meetings.
2. Individualized and on-going training programs available for regular classroom teachers and educational assistants involved with your child (specific to ASD and to your child's particular needs).
3. Educational assistant to reduce effective class size and provide direct additional teaching of concepts introduced by the classroom teacher. Also, while the class teacher is responsible for the educational program of your child, the EA can reduce the load by materials preparation, recording progress and helping with other students when the teacher is engaged in direct one-to-one teaching with your child. I do not think it is reasonable to request that a teacher provide a regular class program as well as a specialized program for one student without additional support in the classroom (remember that among the "regular" population of any classroom are children with behavioural and academic differences - your child will not be the only one who needs extra attention and program modifications).
4. Reduced class size - ideally 25 or less.

5. Teacher needs sufficient programming time and also time for meeting with other team members (most elementary school teachers work very long hours already).
6. Additional money for specialized materials - parents can help by buying or constructing the modified teaching materials needed by their child (perhaps local support and community groups could be approached to donate more expensive materials). School boards have very constrained budgets right now, so you will have to be creative.
7. School administration (ie. principal, vice-principal) must be supportive and have a positive attitude toward integration.
8. Integration cannot work if there are too many children with special needs put into one classroom. Certain schools and teachers build reputations for having accepting and positive attitudes with respect to integration. This information passes by word-of-mouth and soon these schools may become overloaded and stressed by trying to include too many needy children in one class. The rule-of-thumb for successful integration is that the incidence of individuals with disabilities in a classroom should not exceed the incidence in the regular population. That means that in a class of 25 children, no more than 1 of them should have a severe behavioural or communication problem.
9. Education of non-disabled classmates and their families about the nature of your child's abilities and disabilities is essential to foster true inclusion and acceptance in the school "community". This can be done informally through playground conversations with other parents who then pass on information to their own children. Teachers can also foster discussions in their classrooms about the differences between people and how all people have special needs and also special talents. There should be some direct discussion of your child's needs with the other children (eg. "Bob may want to play, but he doesn't know how to ask - why don't you ask him?", "If you sit too close to Sue, it makes her uncomfortable - make sure there's an empty hand-space between you when you sit next to her on the carpet"). Look for chances to highlight your child's abilities in front of the class (eg. bring in stories he has written at home on his computer, bring in pictures or models he has made and let him show them to the class).

Integration is not simple and there is no prescribed "formula" to follow. Be flexible, research your school options well, be ready to change direction and learn from your mistakes. Constructing a quality integrated program is worthwhile and can be beneficial in improving academic, communication, social/interactional and behavioural skills. Non-disabled classmates also make positive social and emotional gains as they interact with children with disabilities - the attitudes of tomorrow's society are formed in the school classrooms of today.

As a final note, there are some children who are not ready to benefit from full integration at school-entry age. If the child has severe behavioural concerns, is aggressive to others or is extremely self-abusive, a regular class placement is not suitable and special class placements should be considered (eg. small language or behavioural class). Once the child has improved his basic skills, you may be able to try integration on a part or full-time basis. In the intervening time, the child can be integrated by the family into community-based activities (eg. swimming lessons, library, play groups).

References:

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