



Making Inclusion Work

Working with children with autism spectrum disorders is often like riding a roller coaster without a seat belt—you never know what will be around the next corner or if the next bump will dump you out of the car. I have found that no two children and no two days are the same

where ASD is involved. The needs of our children change on a daily, sometimes hourly, basis. Striving to meet these needs (sensory, anxiety, and food based) and provide an education is a full-time job. In my classroom, there are five adults and ten children ages 5–11. Most of the children are included in the general education setting for some part of their day. Next year, four of our kindergartners and I will take on the challenge of full inclusion for the first time in our county.

Inclusive Education Experience

I find the most difficult challenge facing my students is a fear of autism spectrum disorders. Most general education teachers have no experience with ASD; their only reference is the movie *Rain Man*. Many teachers will refuse to work with my students simply because of their label. To dispel this fear, I arrange for my students to meet with their general education teachers in the week before school starts. This gives the teacher and the child a chance to check each other out. The teachers can see that this student is just a kid, a little odd sometimes, but nothing scary. This also gives the students a chance to see their new room and new teacher before the chaos of the first day. It gives them a reference point to start the year.

When I begin a year with a new teacher, I provide him or her with information about ASD, samples of the child's work, appropriate modifications, and the student's present level of performance. Then we meet over lunch or a snack during the

week before school starts and discuss the student. Once teachers put a face to the child's name, they tend to be less afraid of the "autism" part of the experience.

Currently, all of my students receive constant support in the general education setting (an aide or myself), and this seems to help the general education teachers feel more comfortable. Sometimes students will need to leave the room because of behavioral outbursts or breakdowns. Many teachers outside of special education do not feel qualified to handle these situations. I try to model the appropriate responses and encourage the other teachers to ask me questions. Prior to the school year, I make emergency plans with the IEP team for each child. During our planning sessions, I tell everyone that no one should attempt to restrain a child if he or she has not been trained. I take responsibility in most emergency situations.

When providing students with sensory strategies in the general education setting, I take into account how distracting the item will be. Sensory strategies should be discussed prior to implementation. General education teachers might not understand the importance of an item and take it away because it is a toy or the child is fidgeting. Strategies used within the general education setting should be discrete and small. Sometimes it is necessary to go in and explain the importance of a sensory item to the other students in the classroom. I have found that doing this eliminates the "I want what he has" battles.

I also provide an in-service for teachers in our county on autism spectrum disorders. This is a great way to reach a wider audience and help teachers who are not in my school. Offering experiences like this helps teachers become more comfortable with the disability. I encourage all of the teachers I work with to attend and am happy to have had several general education teachers from other schools participate. Providing learning experiences like this is a good way to bridge the gap between general and special education.

My students will be in the school system for at least twelve years. Their needs and cognitive skills will change over time;