

Inclusion of Young Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) into the Typical Classroom Setting: Is Your Child Prepared?

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If you and your school district are thinking of including your child with ASD in a general education setting, he/she needs some important skills in order to be successful. While all the skills discussed below are important, the first three are essential *before* inclusion.

1. Your child will be expected to complete dozens of instructions from teachers and peers throughout the day. For example, a teacher may ask students to “Circle the dog with a blue crayon” or “Pretend we’re flying in an airplane”. Therefore, your child must have the ability to comply with and follow through on complex directions.
2. Your child will be in a setting that uses verbal communication, so it’s critical that he/she is verbal and is able to speak in at least four word sentences. He/she should be able to answer basic social questions, such as “How old are you?” or “Do you have any brothers or sisters?” as well as general information questions, such as “How many days are there in a week?”
3. It is important that your child knows how to imitate complex actions. Often, children will miss an instruction such as, “Get your coats and line up at the door.” Students who can imitate complex actions will watch peers, copy what they are doing and blend in with the class. Another advantage is that your child could learn how to use novel toys and play new games by observing peers.

If your child demonstrates these three skills, then the chances of transitioning smoothly into the typical setting are more promising. Still, there are other areas to consider:

Because social and play skills are an integral part of school, it is important for your child to learn how to reciprocate comments about an object (“My car is blue”), reciprocate social comments (“My name is John”), take turns and share toys, answer and ask social questions, respond to his or her name and maintain eye contact during a conversation. It would be beneficial to play different games, complete puzzles and engage in pretend play with your child on a daily basis.

It is important to pre-teach classroom routines to children who are transitioning to the typical environment. For example, teach your child how to stand for and recite the Pledge of Allegiance, practice morning circle time, line up at the door, raise a hand to answer a question, work independently on a worksheet and even how to “sit like a pretzel”. These are typical classroom skills your child will need. Knowing them will help him/her have a more successful experience.

Pre-academic skills are also important. It would be an advantage if your child can answer a variety of general information questions pertaining to colors, letters, numbers, shapes, calendar, weather, etc. Drawing pictures, coloring, cutting, gluing, and creating art projects are also good activities to practice.

It may be helpful to set up a home program or have your child participate in a structured playgroup with typical peers in order to practice these skills.

Aside from pre-teaching skills to your child, you can observe the teacher's style of teaching. Learners with ASD do best with teachers that are very structured. Usually, these teachers have a consistent schedule and daily routine which can be beneficial to a smooth transition. Teachers who are often described as "firm" or "strict" tend to enforce rules. For example, it's confusing to a child with ASD if a teacher tells students that they must raise their hand to answer a question but then responds to children who call out answers.

A critical factor in the success of a student who is included in general education is the classroom teacher him or herself. Often, the general education teachers who will be working with a student with ASD benefit from "pre-teaching" as well. In order for the transition to go well, a teacher must understand the learning style of children with ASDs and be ready to provide the types of supports, accommodations and modifications needed for the child to benefit from being included. Teachers often need support from consulting specialists, including those with expertise in social, language and behavioral issues students with ASDs. And, it is vital that teacher have planning time to coordinate efforts with specialists, such as speech-language professionals, occupational therapists, and others.

I hope this article helped you to begin to assess whether your child is ready for inclusion. I have suggested some ideas of how to prepare your child and what to look for in a teacher. It's always a good idea to work with a professional who has experience and training working with children with ASD to help tailor the transition to your child's needs.

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