

Early Childhood Connection

A Newsletter for Minnesota Families of Young Children with Disabilities

Least restrictive environment offers opportunity for children with disabilities

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By Beth Casper

When 4-year-old Kayla started at a Montessori pre-school and childcare program, the school district recommended that she leave Montessori daily and take a bus to another preschool for special services. At the other preschool, the district would provide time with an early childhood special education (ECSE) teacher, as well as physical and occupational services.

"But once we tried the system, I started to wonder why I was pulling her out of a setting where she was functioning well," said Kayla's mother, Madeleine*. "I wanted her to meet her IEP goals, but I didn't want her to leave the Montessori school."

Kayla's Individualized Education Program (IEP) emphasized learning social skills and gross and fine motor skills. Specific activities included Kayla participating in a game of "Duck, Duck, Grey Duck" with her peers,

going down the slide during playground time, initiating play with her classroom friends, and playing dress-up with her peers.

By being pulled out of the Montessori preschool program, Kayla was losing time needed to become acquainted with her peers, play confidently with them, and feel comfortable approaching them.

"How would she learn social skills, like playing 'Duck, Duck, Grey Duck,' without her peers?" Madeleine said. "I realized that pulling her out of the Montessori school didn't allow her to function in her least restrictive environment (LRE)."

Least restrictive environment (LRE) is a requirement under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which states that: "...to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public and private



Kayla loves going to her Montessori school.

* Name has been changed.

LRE: Parents understand child's needs

Continued from page 1

institutions or other care facilities, [be] educated with children without disabilities, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from regular educational environments occur only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved.”

With that in mind, Madeleine questioned if Kayla would succeed in school while going back and forth between both programs. She asked the school district if they could provide the services at the Montessori school. Now, Kayla receives physical and occupational therapy for a half-hour every week with the peers she sees on a regular basis.

Minnesota has had a long history of including children with disabilities in regular education and preschool environments, and there has been state support for inclusive services, said Norena Hale, state director of special education at the Minnesota Department of Education.

“But still, the model of services for 3-year-olds has been to try to serve them in a classroom instead of serving them where they are learning naturally,” she said. “Children have a right to a free, appropriate education in a setting that is as ‘normal’ as possible. You only remove children from that setting, even part-time, when support or adapted services would be more effective to provide in another way, and the IEP team, which includes parents, makes those decisions.”

For children ages 3-5, a childcare center could be

considered the least restrictive environment, if that is where the child usually goes every day. For other children, the least restrictive environment might be the local Head Start program, a half-day preschool, or at home.

For Jolie Cummins, the least restrictive environment for her son, Charlie, is not the typical kindergarten program in his school district, but a slightly modified program with five other children with disabilities.

Charlie, who has Down syndrome and is nonverbal, attends a program where he experiences a typical classroom with 25 children as well as a self-contained classroom for six children with disabilities. With his aide, Charlie experiences circle time with the 25-student classroom, but then he goes to his smaller classroom to draw when the other students are

working on writing the alphabet.

“This program gives the students a safe place to be,” said Jolie. “Charlie and the other children with disabilities start their day in the self-contained classroom where they hang up their coats, choose their lunch for the day, and receive some individual attention. If Charlie was always in the typical classroom, he could get lost in the shuffle.”

So far, Charlie’s program is a perfect fit. He goes on field trips regularly—bowling and swimming with the small class, for example—which would be very difficult in a typical kindergarten classroom, his mother said. He enjoys school, and he has been invited to a birthday party by one of the children in the typical classroom.

“My goal is for Charlie to be as independent as possible,” Jolie said. “I believe this program will help him reach those goals.”



The Cummins family: (standing) Monte, Dennis, and Jolie, (in front) Staci, Charlie, and Teddy.

Project KITE works with professionals, parents to keep children with disabilities with their peers

By Kari Jaehnert

Assistive technology can be an integral part of educating children with disabilities and allowing them full access to the general curriculum. Preschool teachers can make small adaptations and accommodations that will allow a child to participate in activities in the classroom with their peers.

Through involvement in a free training program, PACER's Project KITE (Kids Included through Technology are Enriched,) many early childhood professionals in Minnesota have learned how to use assistive technology in their classrooms to remove barriers for children with disabilities.

Project KITE offers a collaborative approach to parents and teachers, giving them an opportunity to learn strategies and practices for classroom inclusion of special needs children through the use of technology. Project KITE is an opportunity for experienced teachers who want to improve their technology use, new teachers looking for help with assistive technology or inclusion of children with disabilities, and parents who want to work with their early intervention or preschools to ensure the best possible experience for their children with disabilities.

The following are some examples of what Project KITE participants have done to include children with disabilities in a least restrictive environment:

- A child who is nonverbal uses a communication device to participate in circle-time activities. Messages can be programmed into the device allowing the child to sing repetitive phrases in songs and greet the other children.

- Young children who struggle with writing or drawing use accessible drawing programs to design pictures and color the same pictures as their peers.

- Multimedia authoring tools are used to allow students to design interactive stories using text and drawings. Creative expression through the use of pictures allows a child to tell a story about their summer vacation or a recent field trip.

- Customized software programs allow children to complete puzzles and worksheets on the computer. This is especially beneficial for a child who could not otherwise grasp a pencil or manipulate small puzzle pieces.

- Sam, who is nonverbal, uses digital pictures and a talking computer program to select a reading partner for the day. The children can then take turns reading pages from a book by activating a communication device with the story pre-programmed into it.

These are just a few examples of how previous KITE participants have used technology to assure a least restrictive environment and access to the regular curriculum.

Project KITE offers a unique opportunity to learn about the latest in assistive technology software and devices. Project KITE continually accepts applications. Please contact Project KITE staff for more information about how you can use technology in a pre-school or Headstart classroom and provide access to all students.

For more information about Project KITE or PACER's Simon Technology Center, call (952) 838-9000 or visit online at www.pacer.org/kite



Vincent tries out a computer program with the help of PACER's Simon Technology Center staff.

Ask the expert: Finding the least restrictive environment

Shelley deFosset is Associate Director of the Partner Collaboration Unit at the National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center. This center supports the implementation of the early childhood provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. deFosset is an expert in inclusion and least restrictive environment.

In the United States, almost 140,000 children with disabilities ages 3 to 5 are being served in segregated settings, according to national data from the 1998-99 school year. In Minnesota, almost 25 percent or 2,817 of young children with disabilities in preschool are placed in an early childhood special education setting.

Experts, such as Shelley deFosset, say that many of these children should be included in a typical early childhood setting. The experts worry that parts of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), including “least restrictive environment,” are not being implemented. Least restrictive environment (LRE) means that to the maximum extent possible, a child with disabilities is educated with children who do not have disabilities.

“Least restrictive environment is a legal entitlement of a child (see green box about the law),” said Shelley deFosset. “It clearly defines what a child needs and the environment in which a child would best flourish. With LRE, a child with disabilities is more apt to be part of the regular classroom or preschool program. However, in some cases, LRE can be a segregated program. It depends on the child.”

Deciding the least restrictive environment must be done on a case-by-case basis. A team including school staff and the family studies the assessment of the child and looks at how the child has managed in other settings, such as church or synagogue, play groups, or day care. A regular education teacher needs to attend the Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings to discuss the skills that are expected of children in the classroom or program. With this information, a child can be placed in the least restrictive environment.

Scientific-based research has shown that children

with disabilities learn more and socialize more when they are educated with their peers without disabilities.

“Inclusion is belonging,” said Shelley. “It’s about the child and their family members participating in community and school. It is good for children with disabilities, and good for their peers. It really sets a basis and expectation for school-age children.”

Shelley said that families need to be given the appropriate array of options by school staff. If parents aren’t aware that their child could receive services in the regular program, such as a Head Start program or other community program, their child may end up in the segregated program from the very beginning. Preschool staff also needs to relay to parents that inclusion with supports is a good option, she said.

“Parents often come with the idea that the more special education my child receives, the better,” Shelley said. “But we’ve found that many children with disabilities are very successful in inclusive environments. It works best when you start very early, such as preschool.”



Shelley deFosset

What the federal law says:

(b) Each public agency shall ensure—

(1) That to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled; and

(2) That special classes, separate schooling or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.

Meet the Staff: PACER reaches out to Hispanic families to support their children with disabilities

By Beth Casper

When Jesús Villaseñor first meets a Hispanic family with a child with disabilities, he tells them what it was like in the United States before passage of the Education of Handicapped Children Act of 1975. (That bill was later changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA.)

“In most of the countries they are from, these families can relate to my story,” Jesús said. “In other Spanish-speaking countries, children with disabilities don’t have civil rights like the ones in the special education law.”

Jesús, a PACER advocate, teaches families who are unfamiliar with special education services about the IDEA, where to find disability-specific information, how to communicate with school staff, and how to be an effective advocate for their child with a disability.

The concept of inclusion, as well as Least Restrictive Environment (see story on page 1), is often a difficult one to explain given that the families have experienced the social stigma and even hostility toward their child with disabilities in another country. Jesús offers the families as much information as possible and helps them understand that most children with disabilities here are educated along with their peers in the local daycare, preschool, or classroom.

“What this country is showing is that all children can learn and people with disabilities can be successful,” Jesús said. “That is very powerful for these immigrant families and is sending a strong



Jesús Villaseñor works with Hispanic families throughout Minnesota.

“In most of the countries they are from, these families can relate to my story. In other Spanish-speaking countries, children with disabilities don’t have civil rights like the ones in the special education law.”

message around the world.”

Jesús receives phone calls mainly from families from Mexico and Puerto Rico. They hear about Jesús through word-of-mouth, from Latino organizations in the community, and from pre-schools or other programs such as Headstart. Parents find out that Jesús can offer his help, including attending school meetings with parents.

“At first, families are very grateful here,” Jesús said. “It is scary for them to be in a new country, but they can see that for the first time in their lives people are paying attention to their children with disabilities.”

Jesús wants Hispanic families to understand that their children have a right to a free, appropriate public education.

“According to U.S. law, it doesn’t matter what their legal status is in this country, all children have a right to education, and children with disabilities have a right to special education services,” Jesús said. “That should change the life of a child.”

Physical education classes can be adapted for children with disabilities

Local school district staff ensures all children are included

By Beth Casper

Tom Kobelinski's ideas have pioneered a whole new way of thinking about physical education and physical fitness. He finds the most creative ways for students with disabilities to perform successfully in physical education classes. He never assumes that a child can't be involved or would be better off without attending gym.

"I believe that all students belong and can be successful in a regular physical education setting," said Tom, an adapted physical education instructor for the Anoka-Hennepin School District. "I am not a believer that students have to earn their way into least restrictive environments. They are students of the school, and they are welcome. I've never removed the opportunity for a student to participate in regular physical education."

That doesn't mean that Tom hasn't found challenges. One day, a fourth-grade boy with autism sat down on the track at the start of the class's mile run test. Tom decided that he would sit down next to the boy and talk to him about the mile run.

Tom found out that the boy was frustrated because even at the beginning of the run, he was behind the rest of the classmates. Tom and the boy discussed why the students run for a mile, and they watched the other students complete each lap. Afterwards, Tom asked the boy if he would like to run around the track when the other students were

gone. Tom let the boy pick the direction if the boy promised to keep moving for at least one entire lap. The boy completed the task successfully and felt so confident about his abilities that he played dodge ball with the rest of the students for the second half of the class.



Amy, above, who has autism, develops balance and coordination during "scooter city." Noah, right, who has Down Syndrome, is proud of his many motor skills.



In another situation, Tom worked with Marc, a student who screamed every time he entered the gym and for as long as he was in the gym. The previous year, teachers decided to pull Marc out of the physical education classes because of his behaviors. Tom played a game with him in the hallway while another class was in the gym. Eventually Tom and Marc stood at the door to the gym and watched the other students doing calisthenics to music. Upon Tom's cue, Marc ran into the gym and ran laps around the other students—stopping every time the music stopped. Since then, he has attended physical education class with the rest of the students in his grade.

“It's these kinds of interventions that really speak to a child's abilities, not their disabilities,”

Tom said. “I believe that there is optimal performance and functional performance, and I want to shorten the gap between those two.”

Tom's success can also be attributed to his partnership with LeMoyne Corgard, the elementary physical education specialist at Oxbow Creek Elementary School in the Anoka-Hennepin School District. LeMoyne and Tom have developed a



Ellie improves her strength at the climbing wall.

“ I don't ever see any barriers for kids with disabilities—I look for solutions. When I see students in first through fifth grade, I see kids of all abilities. ”

—LeMoyne Corgard
physical education specialist

model curriculum for inclusionary practices, which can be used by the school district. For the model to be successful, Tom and LeMoyne spend many extra hours together and with paraprofessionals planning for specific classes with specific children.

“I don't ever see any barriers for kids with disabilities—I look for solutions,” LeMoyne said. “When I see students in first through fifth grade, I see kids of all abilities.”

LeMoyne said that the model that he and Tom developed for their school district is helping many children be successful and learn new skills.

“I have a unique perspective because I have to look at the needs of anywhere from 20 to 32 of my students in the physical education class,” LeMoyne

said. “That really breaks barriers down. When I see a child truly included, the message that sends to the other kids is the most powerful thing that I've seen as a teacher. We have students who by the fourth grade expect that a child with cerebral palsy will go around the track with them. They see that this child is capable of many things.”



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PACER resources and national projects

PACER’s Project KITE (Kids Included through Technology are Enriched)
Developed at PACER, this replicable model trains parents and teachers to more effectively include young children with disabilities in their homes and classrooms in culturally sensitive ways through the use of assistive technology. The Web page describes the model and includes a products list.
www.pacer.org/kite/

Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion (ECRII)
A national research project funded by the Office of Special Education Programs to study the inclusion of preschool children with disabilities in typical preschool, daycare, and community settings. There are links to other resources as well as topical briefs for parents and professionals.
www.fpg.unc.edu/~ecrii/

PACER’s Early Childhood Project
Provides information and assistance to parents with children ages birth to 5.
www.pacer.org/parent/childhood/index.htm

National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (NECTAC)
NECTAC offers information and research about least restrictive environments for parents and professionals.
www.nectac.org

Project Exceptional Minnesota
This is a statewide network for promoting and supporting inclusive early childhood and school-age programs and providers.
www.projectexceptional.org

Family and Child Transition into Least Restrictive Environments
This project provides manuals for parents and professionals. The manuals include topics such as successful entry and adjustment of young children in inclusive preschool programs and guidance for early intervention staffs and families in identifying and selecting appropriate special education and related services for their child upon entry to preschool. These manuals are available to print.
<http://facts.crc.uiuc.edu>