The following article is an excerpt from the new book, *I Belong: Active Learning for Children With Special Needs*, published this fall by High/Scope Press. For additional information, see page 24.

**From Chapter 5: Small-Group Times**

All children, but particularly those with special needs, benefit from the comfort and security provided by a consistent small group. These children learn best within the context of close human relationships, and consistent small groups allow those relationships to develop and grow with time and appropriate support.

Small groups, like large groups, are not times for teacher-led instruction. Rather than having skill-based or rotating groups, at small-group time adults initiate activities based on curriculum content that is shaped by active learning and in tune with children’s interests, development, and IEP goals (all of which will vary from child to child).

Small-group time offers you the ability to present a wide variety of activities to a group of children in a casual, informal setting. Children explore play and engage with different kinds of materials and equipment, talking freely about what they are doing and discovering, and solving problems they encounter. Adults introduce the activity, but the children make choices about what they do with the materials and ideas they want to investigate.

Because small-group time is initiated by the adult, it offers opportunities to introduce various concepts, materials, or activities planned around IEP goals (e.g., requesting a needed item, following directions, learning to take care of one’s needs). The adult may get ideas from watching the children at work time and observing their interests. Are there new or unexplored materials? Do your observations indicate there are particular content areas that could be emphasized? Do the children in your group bring up ideas you want to expand upon?

Children’s therapists may also offer suggestions and ideas for activities. This means that each small group in the class may be doing a different activity on a given day. Adults sometimes are wary about this idea, worrying that a group will want to do what they see another group doing. This does indeed sometimes happen. Having a group activity well planned, with materials and choice for every student, helps keep the children involved in their own small-group activity. However, if one group sees another group doing something else that they want to
do, this presents an opportunity for you to show them that you respect their ideas and that they have a say in what happens in the classroom. Let them know that if they like, you will plan that activity for their group for the next day. Maybe the group could make a message by “writing” a note on a piece of paper or sticky note to remind you of what they want to do the next day. When children learn that they have input into what is planned, they feel an ownership and connectedness to their group. This kind of bond and camaraderie leads to greater growth, and it is rewarding to watch.

**Active Learning in Small-Group Times**

Including all five ingredients of active learning during small-group times will help children become engaged in the activities and promote meaningful learning. Below are suggestions on how to use these ingredients when implementing small groups, especially when working with children with special needs.

Choice is one of the most effective tools a teacher has for promoting language and communication development.

**Choice.** With any child, at any developmental level, choice is an important part of small-group time. We often think of choice as how the children use the materials, but choice, especially for children with special needs, starts even earlier in the small-group process. A child may insist, for example, that he always sit on the blue chair during small-group time. That’s okay — allow him to choose the same chair. If another child also wants a blue chair, then provide two blue chairs at the table. Usually, meeting the request is not as difficult to satisfy as we might think, as children generally will not have such specific requirements.

However, occasionally when one child sees another wanting something, he or she also wants it. We have found that children are willing to make certain accommodations when they understand situations. If Christopher, who has autism, wants the blue chair everyday, and Juan, who is typically developing, also decides he wants it, try to provide a blue chair for him too. If that isn’t possible, explain the situation to Juan in a mater-of-fact manner: “Christopher gets very nervous and upset when he doesn’t have the blue chair. It makes him confused and maybe even a little scared inside. I’m sorry we only have one blue chair. Do you have any ideas of what we could do to make you happy? Is there something we can do for you, Juan, to make your chair special to you?” It may take a few discussions, but we are often surprised at how understanding children can be when given an explanation, time to understand, and the opportunity for choice and control. They can also be very creative about how to solve the problem and satisfy their needs in workable ways.

Coming to small-group time is also a choice children make, and children with special needs may need more time to make the transition. Give them plenty of notice. Show them the picture schedule of the daily routine explaining which part of the day is over and which segment comes next. They may, for example, need the extra support of a friend taking them by the hand to the table. He or she may want to go to a small-group activity at a different table. That’s fine. (If this happens frequently, watch to see if the child has a special connection to the adult or another child in that group, and consider moving the child to that other group permanently.)

A child may even choose not to participate in small-group time. Respect that decision and offer the child alternatives that still allow group activities to proceed for the rest of the class. For example, a child could choose between small group and looking at books on the couch. Some children may opt to observe rather than actively participate in the group. They may decide to join in later, continue watching from the sidelines, or remain engaged in another quiet activity. Whatever his or her choice, the child can still benefit from the experience.

Choice is one of the most effective tools a teacher has for promoting language and communication development. Many teachers note that asking children to choose requires them to indicate what they want. While this is true, it is important for adults to consider how these choices are presented and what kinds of responses they elicit from children. For instance, a teacher may “set up” an activity in such a way that a child has to request markers (or crayons, tape, or glue). The teacher may ask, for example, “Do you want the blue marker or the green one?” While this situation appears to give the child choices, it actually makes him or her dependent on the teacher’s offerings, and it discourages spontaneous initiation of language on the child’s part. If the adult does most of the talking, and the child simply responds to...
questions, the variety and length of the child’s sentences are limited, as are opportunities to initiate speech.

It is far more effective to have many options available for children, and in a natural and supportive manner allow them to initiate their choices. Watch for nonverbal cues the child might demonstrate, such as glancing at or reaching toward a desired object, and respond to and honor that spontaneous “request.”

Materials and manipulation. A set of materials should be provided for each child in the group. Or, if something like a book, a live animal, or a new computer program is the focus, every child should be able to see, hear, touch, or otherwise engage with it. Children manipulate the materials or discuss related ideas (e.g., Where do animals live and sleep? What might their homes look like?) as they choose. The variety of materials and ways to manipulate them provide marvelous opportunities for fine and gross motor development. Cooked spaghetti at the water table with tongs to pick up and move the noodles, and scissors to clip and cut them, are great for fine motor skills. Snipping straws is also fun as the small pieces “pop” into the air. Going outside with large paintbrushes and “painting” the fence or wall with water provides wonderful large muscle movement as well as opportunities to develop eye-hand coordination.

Provide a wide variety of materials. Include everyday objects, tools, and materials that are natural and found, large and small, touchable and textured. A wide variety of textures provides interest and experience for children who are visually impaired or those who have sensory issues. Most commercially available items feel the same — smooth and plastic. Items such as pine cones, acorns, brushes, even textured wallpaper swatches or sandpaper, provide a variety of new sensory experiences. Close your eyes and feel the materials in your classroom. Even if you don’t have children with visual impairments, remember to make available a variety of these “raw materials” of learning. These materials also set up many occasions for vocabulary learning as you encourage children to share their observations during small-group activities and you introduce new words — nouns, verbs, adjectives — to describe and comment on their actions.

As you plan and work with children with disabilities, remember to consider the developmental levels of the children in your class. A child with a delay may be five years old but still in the sensory-motor stage. Materials and manipulation are very important for these children as that is how they learn. As a result, don’t be surprised to see a child with a delay manipulating the materials in ways a much younger child would handle them. Mouthing will be common. You will need to keep this in mind as you plan your use of materials and perhaps modify some of them to accommodate this. If Jesse in your class is functioning as a toddler, she may just as often chew on a book as look at it. If that is the case, provide some board or bathtub books for her to look at and/or mouth also.

Child language and thought. Small-group is a time for the free exchange of ideas as children are encouraged to talk and communicate about whatever is on their minds. They chat, ask questions, and problem-solve. The room is noisy with the buzz of curiosity and delight. Adults converse with children in a give-and-take manner refraining from asking too many questions or giving too many directions. Accommodations are made for children with different communication needs. For example, children with augmentative or alternative communication (ACC) devices may need to have pictures, symbols, or words — specific to that small-group activity — programmed into their device. Be aware of any communication from the child and respond to it as you can.

Adult scaffolding. Observing, responding to, and accommodating children’s special needs are all essential forms of adult support. Planning activities around the strengths and interests of the children in your classroom, as well as using the curriculum content and IEP goals, also broaden children’s opportunities for growth. For example, a language goal for Jacob — a little boy in our class who was going on to kindergarten the following year — was to use math-related language such as one, some, more, less. He also had a fine motor goal of using a pincer grasp and classroom goals related to counting and learning shapes and colors. Since Jacob loved magnets, the teacher planned a small-group activity with different kinds: magnet bars that would pick up dozens of colorful magnetic discs the size of dimes; magnetic hoops that made wonderful configurations holding magnetic balls. While the originating idea for the activity was based on Jacob’s interests, it is easy to see how following his lead also presented a range of learning opportunities related to Jacob’s goals: math language, fine motor skills, counting, and identifying shapes and colors. It also provided many opportunities to address curriculum content areas such as sorting, classifying, social relations, and even creative representation (using magnets to create animal shapes).

Curriculum Content at Small-Group Times

While small groups are not a time for teacher-led instruction, they do provide many opportunities for adults to introduce materials and ideas related to all areas of curriculum content, including literacy and mathematics.

Literacy. Talking and listening, and reading and writing, are everyday and all-day occurrences in a High/Scope program [See Preschool Readers and Writers by Linda Ranweiler, 2004, and Fee, Fie, Phonemic Awareness by Mary Hohmann, 2002, for more information on promoting language, literacy, and communication in High/Scope and other developmentally based programs.]

Children with special needs, many of whom have communication delays or disabilities, can especially benefit from small-group activities that focus on this area of development. Recognize children’s levels of emerging literacy and writing and scaffold their learning with many opportunities to
During small-group time, a set of materials is provided for each child. A variety of materials and ways to manipulate them support children’s fine and gross motor development.

practice and participate. During snack time you might have a “job sheet” where children draw their letter-linked picture and/or write their names in the square with the picture of the job they want. Their writing may be scribbles, letter-like forms, or invented spelling — accept all their efforts. Occasionally, save the pages and follow children’s progress over the course of the year. You may even want to collect these pages, cut out selected samples, and save them in a portfolio.

Acknowledgment participation — in all its forms — during small-group times. Comment to the children on their activities and interactions. Repeat what they say, or write it down. For example, imagine a small-group time following a visit to a small animal farm, where children observed where the animals lived and how they were fed and brushed. For small-group time the teacher has brought a large sheet of poster paper, a variety of writing implements (including markers and colored pencils), and animal stamps. She has brought these materials together as a way to allow the children to recall and process their experience, each at their own level.

Jamie, a typically developing child, chooses the dog stamp and draws a “big fence” around it. Sam, who has Down syndrome, takes the cow stamp and uses it over and over, saying “moo” each time. And, without saying a word, Sara, a child with pervasive developmental disorder (PDD), draws a picture of the whole farm, using most of the stamps to go through each sequence of events that occurred on the visit. The teacher spends time with each child, listening and writing down the information each child shares — that is, taking dictation — and then reading it back.

Dictation can provide a way for adults to acknowledge, support, and bring value to any language or literacy attempt a child makes, regardless of the child’s developmental level and abilities. This can develop into a turn-taking event once the child is aware that you are writing down his or her words and other sounds. Take the example of Sam. Each time he stamped the cow and said “moo,” the teacher wrote the word on a sticky note and attached it near the stamped cow. This interaction with an adult provided a cause-and-effect learning opportunity that encouraged Sam to continue speaking and stamping.

When teachers make comments and take dictation, they create opportunities for children’s language and literacy development. After Jamie’s teacher wrote exactly what he said — “big fence” — a natural opportunity presented itself for expanding on his statement. Her response, “Yes, there was a big fence at the farm, a big fence painted white,” illustrates how teachers’ comments can serve as natural and appropriate facilitation strategies for children’s developing language.

How can you converse with or take dictation from a child who is nonverbal or difficult to understand? It is important that adults model for all children, regardless of ability or disability, that words can accompany their efforts to communicate. This process will also build trust between the child and teacher. Let’s consider Sara, who has PDD. While participating in the small-group exercise described above, Sara drew a picture of the whole farm, going through the sequence of events she experienced on the visit. Even though Sara did not communicate verbally, she spoke volumes through her gestures and actions. Sara pretended to brush the horse she had stamped on the paper. The teacher then commented on her actions: “Sara, you remember seeing the horse being brushed.

Dictation can provide a way for adults to acknowledge, support, and bring value to any language or literacy attempt a child makes.

Should we write that down?” Through a process of gestural dictation, Sara then took the teacher through each event she remembered, and the teacher was able to put spoken and then written words and vocabulary to each of the events.

References

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