

by Anji Sandage, Parent Educator

When my son started school, his anxieties that were caused because he doesn't learn in the same way as other children effected the whole family, and maybe even the whole school! Special needs can range from severe disabilities to gifted alternative learners, which are children who are especially inquisitive and bright, but who learn differently from other children. Any of these situations are potential problems in an inclusive environment where children of all skill levels, with and without disabilities, participate and learn together in the same class - whether it be kindergarten, preschool, or even a playgroup in your community.

Schools used to keep children with special needs separate from the mainstream classroom so that they could avoid the challenges that come with an inclusive classroom environment, but over time, due to parental concerns, the educational system has changed strategies to include everyone in the same classroom together. Here are key findings about the benefits of inclusion for children and families:

- **Parents' visions of a typical life for their children can come true.**

All parents want their children to be accepted by their peers, have friends and lead "regular" lives. Inclusive settings can make this vision a reality for many children with disabilities and other special needs, where segregating children with special needs limits the benefits and opportunities that they would otherwise receive.

- **Children develop a positive understanding of themselves and others.**

When children attend classes that reflect the similarities and differences of people in the real world, they learn to appreciate diversity.

- **Friendships develop.**

Schools are important places for children to develop friendships and learn social skills. Children with and without special needs learn with and from each other in inclusive classes.

- **All children learn by being together.**

Because the philosophy of inclusive education is aimed at helping all children learn, everyone in the class benefits. Children learn at their own pace and style within a nurturing learning environment.

[\(Excerpt from Inclusive Education By Leslie Soodak, Ph.D., and Elizabeth Erwin, Ed.D.\)](#)

Taking proactive measures to make sure your child has a smooth transition is especially important when you have a child with special needs if you want to avoid much of the stress and worry that a new school year can bring, especially if your child gets a teacher who is not very patient or understanding of your child's unique differences. Some things that you can do to help your child (and as a result you, your family, and your child's teacher and other school personnel) make a smooth transition upon entering school, and at the start of every new school year are:

- **Visit with the principal/preschool director/playgroup coordinator and discuss your child's needs before you start.**

Find out about the teachers and if there is a teacher who would be the best match to work with your child. If you are going to be starting in a private preschool, talk to the preschool teacher. You may want to talk to several preschool teachers and find one that is a good fit for you and your child. If you are starting in a playgroup, you may want to talk to the other parents in the group, depending on what your child's special needs are.

- **Meet with your child's teacher before the school year starts** and discuss strategies and possible interventions (alternative learning strategies) that you know work well for your child.

- **Plan activities at home to support your child's learning and/or make time to help your child with school work.**

Parental involvement is the key indicator for successful learning, over and above any other circumstances. If your child has your support and you are playing an active role in your child's education, then his chances of success are much greater, no matter what the teacher does in the classroom.

- **Take every possible chance you can to be in your child's classroom.**

If you can, volunteer as a teacher's helper in your child's classroom. If this is not possible, stop by the classroom periodically to observe, to talk to the teacher about your child's progress, and to review what is working and what isn't. Make sure that any discussions with the teacher are held either before or after class when you will not be causing a disruption that will effect the learning of other students in the classroom.