



Supporting peer interactions

Introduction

Children with additional needs are known to be at risk of social isolation, and time needs to be spent focusing on how to encourage and support the development of meaningful interactions with their peers.

In the mainstream classroom, the child with additional needs often spends time working 1:1 with a supporting adult, but will also benefit from structured learning and social opportunities alongside, and with, their peers.

Article 23 ,UN Rights of the Child emphasises the importance of this aspect of a child's development and educational experiences. It is a the statutory responsibility of involved professionals to "Support [*learners with SEND*] in making friends" (SEND Code of Practice, 2015, para 1.40)

The fundamentals of communication

The Intensive Interaction approach focuses on early interaction abilities and is designed to support individuals with learning difficulties to develop their communication skills and interactions with others (see www.intensiveinteraction.org). This approach highlights some fundamental skills that are needed to enable each learner to relate to others and interact successfully with them, including:

- Learning to give attention to, and share attention with, another person
- Learning to extend those attentions, and to concentrate on another person
- Developing shared attention into 'activities'
- Taking turns in exchanges of behaviour
- To have fun, to play.

So how can we support the development of these skills for the child with additional needs, and facilitate effective and meaningful interactions with their peers?

Social skills

Every child needs to learn how to behave appropriately in social situations and the necessary skills to enable them to actively participate in activities alongside their peers. This can be supported by:

- Small group activities, facilitated by an adult, where every child has the opportunity to be actively included
- Learning how to respond to requests, questions and instructions in a group/whole class situation (such as registration, interactive storytelling, PE)
- Understanding and following the rules of the classroom (e.g. tidying up their work,

lining up and not pushing in the queue, sitting on the carpet with their peers)

- Creating a social skills group to support the development of turn-taking skills, initiating and sustaining social interactions (e.g. to play board games, to share in decorating biscuits with each member of the group responsible for different decorations, etc.)
- Use of visual aids to support understanding of social conventions/structures/rules – e.g. creating social stories, visual timetable
- Using role play to practice and discuss social situations
- If a child uses a communication device, ensure this is available and accessible to the child during playtimes etc

Linking up with peers

- Promoting connections and common interests
- Establishing buddy systems and pairing children up strategically
- Fostering peer support through use of strategies such as a 'Circle of Friends' (A useful article to read is: Newton C and Wilson D (2012) 'A Circle of Friends' Special Children. October pp.34-36 which can be downloaded at:
<https://inclusive-solutions.com/circles/circle-of-friends/circles-full-article/>

Shared experiences

- Using sharing activities, such as carrying a box together, sharing teaching resources
- Plan for small group work with a consistent group of peers
- Provide sharing experiences that all can participate in and enjoy equally

Classroom culture

- The class teacher should show their approval of the work and behaviour of the child with additional needs, and that they enjoy being with this child, which can increase their social standing in class
- Establishing a classroom culture where differences and what makes each child unique are celebrated
- Give the child with additional needs responsibilities in class (such as giving out books, putting the lights on/off) that will raise their profile in class

Playtime

Playtime can be one of the most difficult parts of the school day for the child with additional needs to be actively involved in with their peers, possibly due to the lack of structure, less adult involvement and a lack of predictability. The child can be supported and encouraged to develop their play and interactions with their peers by:

- An adult modelling and facilitating interactions amongst peers
- Setting up structured play activities. This can include:
 - The use of play equipment such as balls and a basket to throw them in to; hoppers to bounce along a circuit/chalk line etc.); hoops; large building blocks
 - Activities children can easily join in together (e.g. a trug of sand containing buried dinosaurs or buried treasure to find together)
 - Simple games such as chase and hide and seek, ensuring that all the children

know the rules of the game and how to participate

- Providing a smaller, quieter space for a small group of peers to play together (e.g. to set up a train track together)
- Choosing a buddy for playtime, and talking about what they are going to play before they go outside

October 2019