

The Special Needs Child in the Regular Classroom: Mission Impossible?

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Your child's present day classroom is a dramatically different place from its counterpart of a generation ago. Aside from the changes in curriculum and educational standards, the school body itself reflects the vastly different society we live in.

Today, most children come from two-income homes where both parents work outside the house and are generally less available for their children. Sadly for a great many children, the single parent family is becoming more prevalent. Even in otherwise intact homes, parent "absenteeism" has impacted on family stability in the Torah community as well.

As a result, today's teachers find themselves assuming burdens that far exceed the strict business of classroom education. Surrogate parent, social worker, psychologist... As teachers, we are frequently called on to be unofficial specialists in a variety of areas.

One of the most widespread challenges we are called onto address concerns special-needs children who have been placed in regular classrooms. Over the years, the approach has been given different names by the experts; they've called it *integration*, *mainstreaming*, and *inclusion*. With minor differences, all refer to the policy of including children with disabilities in typical educational activities with their peers.

Thanks to special legislation, the public school system has been receiving "inclusion" grants from the government, providing for special services, classroom support and multimedia educational aids. With this support system in place, educators and parents are together with their same-age peers. Since learning is so important in the early years, this is the best time for children to be taught to respect differences and to learn to value the contributions of each individual.

The yeshiva system, however, often takes a more pragmatic approach. Without government funding, and unable for the most part to afford the special services and aids so necessary for inclusion, some yeshivas tend to prefer "tracking" homogeneously – grouping students based on aptitude and performance – as opposed to mainstreaming children with learning disabilities.

Their concerns are understandable. Without classroom special services and support, they reason, won't the inclusive classroom hinder the academic success of regular children without special needs? How will an inclusive environment meet the needs of children with disabilities, if the teacher is working without an assistant and/or teaching aids? Won't the other children lose out on teacher time in an integrated classroom where the teacher's attention is so fragmented?

