

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

By Mrs. Rifka Schonfeld,
Director of "SOS"
("Strategies for Optimum Student Success")

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 learning 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?

Interestingly, within the yeshiva system, "inclusion" sometimes happens by default. With all the progress that has been made in the fields of special education, the fact is that many learning-disabled children attend yeshivos and day schools with inadequate remedial and special education facilities. In some schools, the problem is simply lack of space.

Even in schools that do provide some form of special education, those particular services may be ill suited to certain children. For example, the "pull-out" program, which has students being taken out of class for remedial help, imposes the hardship, especially on very young children, or complete disorientation when the child returns to her regular classroom and is unable to get her bearings on the lesson then in progress.

Such a child may be consistently missing out on vital information without which the lesson is virtually worthless, causing her to fall further and further behind.

Regardless of whether we, as yeshiva teachers have been asked to mainstream as an educationally preferred method, or because of the lack of an affordable alternative, our focus should be on dining an educational approach that

- a) builds confidence
- b) promotes success
- c) instills acceptance of others' differences
- d) minimizes the deficits of the special needs children, without undermining the success of the class as a whole

Mission impossible? Not necessarily. True, inclusion works best when all of the right supports are in place. When they're not, it can easily fail. However, if we set realistic goals with the willingness to go an extra mile (or two, or more!) we might harvest a range of unexpected dividends that will bring us closer that we ever expected, to help8ing all our children realized their fullest potential.



The suggestions below are grouped into two loose, sometimes overlapping categories: practical guidelines for reducing the potential for confusion, time wasting and disruptiveness in an integrated classroom; and strategies to use with the special needs student to maximize performance.

It should be emphasized that in the optimal learning environment, positive reinforcement plays a most important role. Whereas negative reinforcement- punishing and penalizing- may also have a place, in the final analysis, negative reinforcement can stop behavior, but only positive reinforcement can lastingly change it.

Endorse Effort

Consistently praise and reward effort. Be an "easy marker"; show pleasure even with less than perfect results as long as a decent amount of effort was demonstrated. Effort should be as valued by us as achievement.

Managing Transitions

Make review of the daily schedules regular part of the daily routine. Use visual such as picture cards to represent the different activities of the day.

Give five and then one-minute reminders to the whole class before and transition.

Provide the special needs child with a "transitional activity" such as putting a schedule card on the blackboard just before moving on to the next subject.

If you have assistance, have your assistant provide guidance until the child is able to manage during difficult transitions – if an assistant isn't handy, provide peer help for difficult transitions.

Consistency

Remember: consistency is the key to the success of any behavior plan.

When using a behavior plan, either for an individual or the whole class, "collaborate" with the administration and any other staff members who work with the students to devise a plan that is workable on all fronts. Make sure that all staff is prepared to follow through with the plan.

Examples:

Coordinate incentives such as prizes and class trips with the administration, as well as with teachers in both the secular and kodesh departments.

If punishments like detention or withholding of privileges must be meted out, they will be far more effective if carried out with the knowledge and support of the administration.

Spend the first month of school establishing a comfortable routine and learning to "collaborate" with your assistant.

Collaboration/Parent Communication

If you have an assistant, create in your schedule a time for a weekly collaboration meeting regarding the special needs student. During the meeting, talk about aspects of the week which were especially successful for the student, and devise ways to repeat these successes.

Devise a signal with your assistant so that you can call on the child during class at her/his most opportune moments.

Communicate clearly with parents about academic expectations and child's progress.

Modify homework as necessary before sending it home.

Establish a notebook, which travels with child between home and school for communication with parents, staff, and professionals working privately with the student.

Modifying Academic Expectations

- ❖ Prepare the child with several reminders before calling on him/her.
- ❖ Try to plan one academic activity a day that the student can participate in easily. Providing the rest of the class with an easy activity for a few minutes a day will not harm them and will help the "included" student learn to participate successfully with a large group.
- ❖ Vary your group of giving directions, alternating between auditory and visual (blackboard, overhead projector, posters, etc.).
- ❖ Rewrite directions at a more appropriate reading level.
- ❖ Provide the option of taking test orally.
- ❖ Tape record directions or have peers deliver directions.
- ❖ Provide a sample of the finished product before beginning an activity.
- ❖ Limit the number of problems on a page. Make sure worksheets are visually simple, without extra drawings, complex instructions, or crowded problems.

The Index Card Incentive System

Create a special index card system that will be a confidential matter between you and the child in need of help, and will be used to monitor small increments in academic achievement. Use a simple scoring system. Initially, break down the day according to subjects. Gradually, move into more narrow time frames. Designate a time to share the results. Initially, have this contact on a daily basis.

The Buddy System

Pair off the students to learn cooperatively, and to share responsibility for helping each other organize books and homework assignments. The buddies should be sitting near each other to minimize noise and traffic.

The buddy system should match up a weaker student with a well-organized, kind-natured one, so that the weaker student is never humiliated by the experience, and never has her weaknesses broadcast to the class.

The system, though it may take time to institute, can produce a valuable payoff for the entire class. The class as a whole will function more smoothly, and for the learning disabled or disorganized child, it can make all the difference in the world.

Keeping the Child Focused

- ❖ Smile; make eye contact with the child.

- ❖ Use her name in the lesson or example that is being taught to the class.
- ❖ Compliment the child, publicly, on some task or effort.
- ❖ Take a moment or two, once or twice daily, to speak privately to the student; give a two-second pep talk.

Release Time

Talk with your principal about appropriate accommodations for "release time." A student with a short attention span will need time away from the behavioral demands of the large group, which is not to be construed as a punishment. Try to provide this "release time" BEFORE the child's behavior becomes difficult.

Incorporate one or two daily items that the "included" child can do without support (such as classroom jobs, choosing whose turn it is, telling what activity will be next) so that the child has opportunities to be a member of the whole class without relying on adult support.

Above all, never take a child's failure personally.

The following story, written by an education specialist about her own early learning experience, captures the vital truth that children learn in different ways, all of them equally valid.

"From the day we entered fifth grade, one bulletin board was covered with a diagram and a list of terms describing the human digestive system. The diagram stayed on the board throughout the term, although Mrs. Lerner, our teacher, never referred to it. I often had trouble concentrating and my eyes would wander to the bulletin board, following the intricate path of the digestive organs. One day when we came to class, we noticed the bulletin board had been taken down. To our surprise, we were told to prepare for a test. The test consisted of a single question: Describe the human digestive system.

The class protested loudly, "We never studied that!"

"Let's see how well you can do, anyway," the teacher said with a smile. After we had struggled for a while, she collected the papers and ran through them quickly. Then she moved all the papers to one side except for one. She took her red marking pen, scrawled a sweeping "100" across the top of the paper in plain view of every one of us, and stood up.

She held the paper out to me. "Congratulations, Sarah. Spectacular job." She turned to the class. "I wanted to show you," she said, "how people learn in different ways. Some people need to see the words in a textbook. Others need to hear it straight from the teacher's mouth. And some need to learn it from their physical surroundings."

Tears came to my eyes because until that point I was considered the class dummy. Nothing was ever the same afterward. Whether true or not, I imagined that all my classmates saw me differently. And when I looked in the mirror, I knew why: Because I was different.

I have come across many special people in the course of my life. But no one will ever compare in wisdom and compassion to that fifth grade teacher who looked not *at* me, but inside me, and showed everyone the good she found."

Mrs. Rifka Schonfeld teaches in a Brooklyn yeshiva and is director of Strategies for Optimum Student Successes (SOS) a widely acclaimed remedial program in reading and writing, for all grade levels. She has also successfully set up reading labs in a number of New York schools, and has trained teachers to run these programs.

She may be contacted by email at
haloleasing@aol.com

Educational Plan for _____ Limudei Kodesh – _____'s shiur

Homework:

- ❖ Shiurei Bayis forms given to Rabbi _____ to be filled out every day and placed in _____'s binder (there is a clip in the front cover to hold it)
- ❖ Specify exactly what needs to be done (i.e. if there is a test the next day, write/check off "Study words 1-10 for test")
- ❖ Specify a pasuk or a line of gemara for _____ to prepare so he will be confident participating in class.

Tests/Quizzes:

- ❖ Break quizzes/tests into smaller portions – vocabulary test no more than 10 words at a time please. Concept questions or dinim facts will probably be less of a problem.
- ❖ Oral tests and quizzes, by Rabbi _____ or Rabbi _____ (if this gets to be a problem, please call parents right away)
- ❖ When giving tests and quizzes now (at the beginning of the year) give cues if necessary to elicit answers. As the year progresses and success builds, fewer cues will be needed.

Classwork:

- ❖ When students copy from the board, prepare sheets on overhead instead whenever possible. Give _____ copies of these sheets with 5 or 6 words whited out for him to fill in (whenever possible).
- ❖ When this is not feasible, please make arrangements for parents to prepare sheets for him (i.e. dinim questions).
- ❖ It is important to build trust with the rebbe, so consistency with these systems is crucial.
- ❖ Please arrange in advance for _____ to prepare certain pesukim and lines of gemara to read in class (indicate on homework sheets). The more he is successful in participating in class, the more confident he will grow.
- ❖ Remember Performance Inconsistency: Despite the best of plans, the nature of learning disabilities is that some days will be better than others. Please so not be discouraged or exasperated by erratic successes.

Reports Home:

- ❖ Please be positive when writing the weekly reports, and allow successes to build upon each other. Concerns or behavior issues should be dealt with in phone calls to parents as long as things are going smoothly in general.

Other:

- ❖ There is a language processing issue, which means that he may not understand instructions unless they are very specific. When you say "Quiz tomorrow", most kids would infer that they should study the material for the quiz. _____ will not make the connection, and needs to be told "Study the words for the quiz tomorrow." Once your routines are established, he will not need as much explanation, but in the beginning he definitely will. If you say "We are having chumash right after recess, so please be ready," he will not understand that he should take out his chumash after recess. Please note that many times when he doesn't comply, it may be that he didn't comprehend the implied instructions.
- ❖ Please look for opportunities to ask him questions that you are confident he knows the answers to.
- ❖ Please look for opportunities for him to be respected in the eyes of the class. He finds the learning disabilities humiliating and feels that the others look down on him because of them. This can include putting him in charge of planning a siyum, asking him to bring in special supplies (a shofar, or anything that pertains to what you are learning) etc.
- ❖ Please remember that _____ is used to teachers having new plans and systems at the beginning of the year, and then later giving up, forgetting, or becoming frustrated that he is not "responding." Please, please trust that the very best gift we can give this child is to continue to be positive, reliable, consistent and kind to him no matter how negative, unreliable and inconsistent he might at times appear to be.
- ❖ Know that he has a positive feeling for learning, and is learning to learn the entire parshas Nasso for his bar mitzvah in May. He is also learning Makkos with his father, and is very proud of his progress in both of these areas.
- ❖ He will be learning several times a week with Rabbi _____ after Sukkos. We planned for him to go ahead in the Gemara; however, he can do whatever you feel is most productive for him to succeed in your class.

This is a fluid plan, which can evolve and change based on _____'s progress, your needs, and the structure of your class. Thanks very much!