

Special Ed Preschools: Help or Hindrance?

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

For many parents, special ed preschools are like manna from heaven, an answer to a prayer, and the greatest thing since sliced bread! But when we look beyond the apparent benevolence of “helping” young children with disabilities, we’ll know that the special ed preschool experience may be a hindrance to a child’s current and future success.

In most states, preschoolers who *do not* have disabilities do not attend public school; they’re in their natural environments at home, in daycare, and/or at private preschools. Thus, a special ed preschool class in a public school, populated primarily by children with disabilities, is an unnatural environment.

The natural proportion of children with disabilities in the United States is estimated to be ten percent. So in a group of twenty children, no more than two would be children with disabilities. But this natural proportion is *always violated* in special ed preschools, even in those that recruit children without disabilities as “peer role models.” Many of us know that segregating adults with disabilities—in institutions, congregate living settings, sheltered workshops, or adult day programs—represents old ways of thinking. Social isolation and physical segregation are morally reprehensible. And many are working hard to get school-aged children out of segregated classrooms and into inclusive regular ed classrooms with the appropriate accommodations and supports.

Why, then, do we have no qualms about segregating very young children with disabilities? Why do we have no compunction about putting very vulnerable young kiddos on long bus rides to the preschool class at the elementary school across town? We do things to children with disabilities we would *never* do to children *without* disabilities.

Many parents argue that their child’s special ed preschool *is* a wonderful, inclusive classroom. When pressed for details, however, they reveal that yes, all (or the majority) of the children in the class do have

a label of one kind of another. Some are not labeled with “official” disabilities. Instead, they fall into the “needy” category for one reason or another (as represented by combination Head Start/Special Ed Preschool classes). So how can this be a natural environment when almost every child in the classroom has been labeled “deficient” in some fashion? *Duh!*

Children who have not yet acquired speech are placed in a class with other young children who cannot talk yet. How does this make any sense? If we want a child to learn to speak, shouldn’t he be surrounded by others who speak? Place a child who has autism with other children with autism and guess what? He learns to have more autism!

In many special ed preschool classrooms, teachers have low expectations for a child’s intellectual or social development. In fact, a child may be allowed to behave in ways which the child’s parents would *not* allow. A teacher may think, “Kids with [whatever] are just that way.” Do we need to wonder why many children aren’t progressing like we know they could?

Segregation leads to segregation. Every year, millions of parents are dismayed and angered when they learn their children will *not* be moving from a special ed preschool to a regular ed kindergarten class. Unless your neighborhood elementary school is already an inclusive school for *all* students with disabilities, the odds are high that students with disabilities who have attended special ed preschools will automatically go into a special ed resource room in kindergarten or first grade!

For any number of reasons, a child who has spent two years in a “get-ready” program is still deemed “not ready” for the regular ed environment at age five. Yet children without disabilities are not held to any “get ready” standard before they enter kindergarten. Worse, many children are *held back* for another year! How does one “fail” preschool, for Pete’s sake? (This never happens in typical preschools.) No

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one, of course, ever looks to the special ed preschool environment as a potential *cause* of the child not being “ready.” Instead, everyone “blames the child.”

Kindergarten retention is another troublesome scenario. The rationale behind this decision is usually something like, “He needs another year to mature.”

Again, we fault the child—but maybe it was the teacher who didn’t “get it right.”

There’s a bigger issue, however. Let’s assume we decide Robert needs another year “to mature.” His birthday is in December, so when the next school year rolls around and he begins kindergarten for the second time, he’s 6 1/2. How in the world do we expect him to “mature” when he’ll be surrounded by children who are five? Instead of maturing, he’ll simply be more like the children he’s around! School retention is very harmful. A dear friend who was held back as a kindergartner (and he does not have a disability) once told me, “I didn’t stop feeling stupid until I earned my Master’s degree, when I was in my mid-40s!”

Children with disabilities who are placed in special ed (segregated and ungraded) classrooms during the primary years can generally expect to remain incarcerated in these “resource rooms” for the remainder of their school careers. They leave the public school system, uneducated or undereducated, and unprepared for life as successful young adults. Most will move into adult services, joining the estimated 70-75 percent of adults with disabilities who are unemployed and are living below the poverty line, collecting disability welfare.

Are there exceptions to the doom and gloom I’ve painted of special ed preschools? Of course. But only a very few. Some school districts never created special ed preschools. Instead, they take services to the child in his natural environment (home or neighborhood preschool/daycare center).

We can and should do better for young children with disabilities than placing them in unnatural, segregated environments. They deserve more than that. How dare we rob a young child of the precious opportunities of living a real life?

Where would a child be spending his time if he didn’t have a disability? Wherever that is, *that’s where he should be*. He will benefit from being at home with

mom, playing and learning in an ordinary preschool with kids who don’t have disabilities, and experiencing life to the fullest, included in his community.

“Yes, *but*—” many parents wail, “my child loves it, it’s a great classroom, and it’s *free*...”

All of this may be true. But remember: a young child who has been successful in inclusive, natural environments is far more likely to be included in a regular ed kindergarten class than one who has been in a “special” environment. He will be viewed by educators as competent and successful, and these attributes will be his ticket to an inclusive education. And if you paid preschool tuition for your other children, doesn’t your child with a disability deserve the same?

As a preschooler, my son was successfully included in a neighborhood preschool. I did not call and ask if they “accepted” children with disabilities. I just enrolled him, paid the tuition, and then helped the teachers learn how best to assist him. When he was three, he went Tuesday/Thursday; at four, he went Monday/Wednesday/Friday—not five days a week! He did not need an aide. Yes, he needed extra help, but he got it from his teachers and his classmates. He made friends and got invited to birthday parties just like other kids. Today he’s in college.

All children are born included—it’s the natural state. Children with disabilities become excluded not because they have disabilities, but because of *our actions*. If we want them to be successful and included as adults, we need to make sure they’re successful and included as children!

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