



Scene of classroom teaching

TEACHER: This book is called *The Cows Are in the Corn*.

Children are counting while jumping and sitting in a circle reciting the days of the week.

Children are holding hands in a circle while dancing and listening to music.

TEACHER: “Okay. Trace all the way around the ear. Good job.” (to children working with arts and crafts).

NARRATOR: For most parents, finding the right preschool for their child is a difficult task. But what if your child is a special needs child? What do you do if you have a child with autism spectrum disorder?

TEACHER: And he began to shout, the goats are in the oats and they won’t come out. (With children in an acting scene.)

NARRATOR: Every parent of a special needs child must face two difficult rights of passage – the shock of being told there is something wrong with their child, followed by the cold, hard reality of finding the best course of action.

PARENT CHRISTINE ROBINSON: One of the things that was difficult was watching him go through the testing and being asked to do things that he wasn’t able to do, and it kind of drove home again the fact that things were not right and here it was showing up in tests right in front of us.

PARENT JILL KERNS: As much I didn’t want to believe it and I didn’t really want to hear it, it was happening, and we took her from there and he didn’t have a hearing problem and he didn’t have a visual problem. All this avoidance of looking at us is all part of autism.

PARENT LESLIE VINSON: She spent literally zero time with him and then turn around and told us that he had autism. Then, straight from autism – a word that we didn’t know – into a definition of all the things that wouldn’t happen. He wouldn’t make friends, he wouldn’t care about people, he probably wouldn’t ever learn to talk. He basically would not have a very meaningful life.

PARENT JILL KERNS: Then from then it was just let’s get busy. Let’s do whatever we can to help our kid.

NARRATOR: When looking for a quality preschool program for a child with autism, here are a few guidelines to keep in mind. Look for a program that creates an environment for open communication and mutual trust between staff and parents. Is there clear information that explains the philosophy of the program and strategies that will be used with the child? Does the staff speak in a respectful manner when discussing family issues with other staff members? Are



parents involved in classroom activities? Are parents treated as members of their child's educational team?

Classroom setting with children playing

Everybody find a shape here on the rug. Children singing and playing a game.

NARRATOR: Every child is different and unique in their own way, but for those diagnosed with what is called "autism spectrum disorder," those differences are considerable and often hard to understand.

Todd having a tantrum.

NARRATOR: What is "autism spectrum disorder?" It is a syndrome with a range of characteristics that include limited social skills, limited communication skills, repetitive or unusual patterns of behavior, interests or activities and limited cognitive skills. This was Todd two years ago during his first days in an early childhood setting.

TODD'S MOTHER: We went through a phase when he was banging his head. His temper was microseconds short. I remember once trying to go into a store with him and the lady didn't have the door open yet. She was standing there unlocking it and it was a glass door. He just slammed his head into it and I thought for sure the door was going to break. When I pulled him away from that, he dropped to the floor, turned around and slammed his head on the concrete. His public school classroom is part of a three-school demonstration project where children diagnosed with autism learn side by side with typically developing children.

Teacher interacting with Todd.

NARRATOR: This is Todd in an integrated, early-childhood preschool classroom two years later. The key feature of this classroom is its emphasis on addressing the poor social-skills deficit of young children with autism.

Teachers working with Todd.

TEACHER: Todd's development has changed so radically I can't even describe it. I think a lot of parents that have typical kids in Todd's class don't even know that Todd is autistic. He went from only being able to talk about something to do with him, "I want an apple, I want juice," to, "Nate's jumping on the trampoline."

Teachers working with Todd and other children.

TEACHER: He's done such a great job at absorbing the social-skill training.

NARRATOR: In order to ensure this kind of positive social outcome, preschool programs for children with autism should capitalize on the presence of typically developing peers; utilize effective environmental arrangements to encourage social interactions; use prompting and reinforcement of interactions; structure activities to encourage sharing, turn-taking, requesting



and distributing items and working cooperatively; utilize materials that are high interest, novel and high in social value

Teachers working with Todd and other children.

JULIE BARANOUCKY (Occupational Therapist): The typically developing peers in the classroom are great models for our kids with autism. We have done a lot of direct teaching and teaching those typical kids in the classroom on how to be models and how to model social skills. I think too that we have really reinforced that throughout the school year.

NARRATOR: Every day Todd and other children with autism attend classes with typically developing students in this classroom.

Teachers and students singing.

NARRATOR: At first glance, the class looks like a typical preschool class. But spend a little time here and you will see all of the additional accommodations, adaptations and modifications that make this blended inclusive classroom a success.

Teachers role playing with puppets.

NARRATOR: One of the most obvious differences in this room is that there are two sets of teachers. Regular educators whose primary responsibility is to plan a curriculum that will accommodate the needs of all of the children. And special education teachers along with related service personnel who are in charge of giving students with autism the special help they need to make progress in the class. The result is that there is a curriculum within a curriculum and constant joint communication and planning. When assessing the classroom environment, make sure the classroom is organized and maintained in an attractive manner; that it has an organized daily schedule; that there are easily recognizable unit themes; and teamwork is encouraged via transdisciplinary service delivery.

Teachers using flip charts with children.

NANCY BURDIC (Speech/Language Pathologist): Generally, what we need to be working on in the classroom are things that will make them successful with their peers, make them successful in a classroom setting and also so that they can generalize some of the things or almost all of things they are learning in the classroom into their private life. In order for them to understand what is going on around them and to make sense of it, everything that you present to them needs to be clear with a consequence that's easy to determine for them.

Teachers working with students in arts and crafts.

NARRATOR: To integrate children with autism into a class of typical learners, adjustments must be made to accommodate the differences in how children with autism learn.



NANCY BURDIC (Speech/Language Pathologist): A typical symptom of autism is very poor auditory processing and that is the child hears the message going in, but it doesn't mean anything to them. They aren't auditory learners necessarily which is why it's so important that we have some kind of visual cue system going on.

Teachers demonstrate cuing system with children.

NARRATOR: Because many children with autism learn and integrate much of their information visually, it poses a dual challenge for teachers. If an environment has too much visual material, it can distract students from their lessons.

COLLEEN MILLER (Classroom Teacher): The biggest difference in setting up the classroom compared to what we used to do is a lot of visual cues, but sometimes we have to worry about what's on the walls – visuals that might be disturbing a child at circle time. We would remove those or cover them.

NARRATOR: Because children with autism tend to have difficulty processing verbal information, teachers must rely on a variety of teaching techniques to be effective. Teachers use a system of pictures called "picture exchange communication system" or PECS to help children who have difficulty using verbal language.

JILL MUSGRAVE-BALTHAZOR (Early Childhood Special Education Teacher): There's a variety of things that we use. We use, for instance, at some of our tabletop activities where there is a multi-step fine motor project, we may have a visual sequence of what you do first, what you do second, what you do third to help them complete that activity. We have some children where transition is a hard time of the day. They're leaving one activity and having to start another activity and that can be difficult. So, with some children we use what we call picture schedules and it's just their day in pictures. The ones we use are vertical and when it's transition time, they need to check their schedule. We give them a verbal cue to check their schedule.

NARRATOR: In addition, each individual play area has a folder with a sentence strip in pictures. If a child wants something, they use the "I want" strip and put the picture of what they want on the end of the sentence. But pictures are not the only tools used to build communication skills.

NANCY BURDIC (Speech/Language Pathologist): Besides using picture exchange to help the children fully participate in the class or make requests or communicate with other people, we've used some electronic devices. One of them is a big mac window button you depress that says "my turn."

NARRATOR: Teachers also use the computer to increase communication skills. Children with autism also have trouble keeping track of what is going on around them socially.

JILL MUSGRAVE-BALTHAZOR: One thing for children with autism is it's difficult for them to read social cues, to read our faces and to read what's happening in the environment. So,



the more it is clear to them what the expectations are and what the rules are and that staff is going to follow through is critically important.

NARRATOR: Because of that, teachers also use direct teaching and imbedded teaching strategies with students throughout the day.

JILL MUSGRAVE-BALTHAZOR: Children with autism need direct teaching in the classroom for many reasons. One reason is for practice, another is for repetition to learn a new skill. It takes them many trials to accomplish that new skill. We have a work basket area in our classroom that's another center as the other learning centers in our classroom are. We take kids there and we have many opportunities to directly work with them and teach them new skills.

NARRATOR: Teachers also incorporate or imbed some training into daily lessons.

JILL MUSGRAVE-BALTHAZOR: We have incorporated a social skills curriculum into our daily routine and every day at large group time, we have a targeted social skill that we're working on.

NARRATOR: Also during large group time, staff members stand behind the group ready to step in and help children with autism keep up with the activities and participate appropriately.

TEACHER: Sometimes you may need to get their attention, possibly getting down to their eye level or possibly a physical prompt like possibly turning their face if that's necessary, getting their body so they are paying attention to you is very important.

NARRATOR: What this means for the staff is a daily regime of planning, positive behavioral guidance, direct teaching, imbedded teaching, data collection and coordination with parents. The day begins a half hour before the children arrive with a planning session to discuss the day's goals for each student. This planning and communication continues at various times during the day. During class, as they work with children, they take data to measure the progress on individual goals. At the end of the day, staff review their data. They discuss what is working and not working with particular kids and they make a plan for the following day. Parents say this close communication with teachers is essential.

TODD'S MOTHER: I think communication and trust is the most important thing – the single most important thing when you're working with any kid in any family. I think it's something that goes both ways.

PARENT JILL KERNS: The communication between the classroom and us is, without it you might as well throw everything away. Everybody has to work together. If you don't, you have a really weak link and that's what's going to bring Sierra out. That's what's going to bring out the most typical child out there.