



Inclusion and Disability Awareness Training for Educators

in the **Kids Like You, Kids Like Me** Program

Julie Mickel and Jayne Griffin

Melissa McCreary, a third grade teacher, is attending a workshop on disability awareness and inclusive practices. All participants have been assigned a random partner with whom they take turns simulating a disability and being the guide.

Day one activities of the workshop take Melissa on a pseudo scavenger hunt as she spends the morning shopping in retail stores, accessing public office buildings, and dining at a restaurant. The workshop leaders send Melissa out into the city wearing goggles that are blacked out to simulate visual disability. She gains new perspectives and the realization that students with visual disabilities can benefit from several classroom accommodations, one simply spacing desks further apart.



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Photos courtesy of the authors.

This is an expanded version of an article first appearing in the July 2007 issue of *Young Children*.

naeyc 6, 8, 10

AS A RESULT OF THE IMPROVEMENTS in and the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (Public Law 108-446), classrooms across America are evolving into inclusive learning environments where children with and without disabilities learn side-by-side. Often, however, general education teachers find themselves unsure of how to address the needs of students with disabilities through the general curriculum.

Partners in helping inclusion happen

In Chattanooga, Tennessee, Siskin Children's Institute and Creative Discovery Museum partnered to address inclusion planning needs by starting an annual, multifaceted program for educators and students—called Kids Like You, Kids Like Me—to promote teacher and student understanding and acceptance. These two institutions previously collaborated to provide an inclusive camp for children with autism, which led to the realization of the need to teach disability awareness. Through this community partnership between the institute and the museum, participants in the program leave enriched, through activities, dialogue with each other, and knowledge gained from speakers with wide and varied expertise in implementing best practices to support inclusive educational opportunities.

Teacher workshops

The Kids Like You, Kids Like Me program starts with a three-day teacher workshop, with the goal of challenging existing attitudes concerning disabilities and giving teachers tools they need to successfully include children of all abilities in general educational curricula. The workshop incorporates a variety of approaches to meet varied learning styles, including creative simulation activities, lectures, inclusive social gatherings, journaling, interactive disability discussion panels, lively skits, and packets of resources for teachers. Research supports the effectiveness of a multidisciplinary approach as vital in heightening an awareness of disabilities and in instilling positive perceptions of individuals with disabilities (Herbert 2000).

Using a combination of approaches addresses the varied learning styles of workshop participants while reiterating the key message—that there are similarities in all children. Some teachers learn best through lecture; another educator’s eye-opening moment may come while enjoying lunch with a person who has cerebral palsy. Still other participants may find answers while reflecting on their experiences, setting goals, and writing about both in a journal. The act of writing encourages teachers to view the day’s situations and challenges in new ways, thus leading to exploration and discovery (Tertell, Klein, & Jewett 1998).

Simulations. For many teachers, the most memorable part of the workshop is the simulation activities. Most of the world’s population has never navigated city streets in a wheelchair or even imagined communicating with a bank teller using a communication device. For teachers in the Kids Like You, Kids Like Me workshop, these challenges become a momentary reality. Each teacher experiences a day in the life of a person with a disability. They complete daily tasks while using wheelchairs, assistive technology devices, or goggles simulating visual impairment.

An activity like this is easy to create in most any community. In Chattanooga, we simply brainstormed ideas to identify a variety of businesses, including some settings that are accessible for people with disabilities and some that are not. Even transportation includes learning opportunities, such as using a lift to board a bus or crossing a street while unable to see oncoming traffic.

Panel discussions. The panel discussion can be customized to the needs of nearly any group. For the Kids Like You, Kids Like Me program, a panel of discussants included community members, both children and adults, who have a range of different disabilities. They each spent seven minutes discussing their strengths and accomplishments, as well as the obstacles they have overcome.

Because many individuals have never talked one-on-one with a person who has a disability, meeting the panel participants and hearing their stories is an opportunity to experience real-life examples of successful people with disabilities. The discussion following the simulations typically shows how many similarities there are in people of all abilities.

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Reflections. Siskin Children’s Institute and Creative Discovery Museum received 100 percent “positive” marks in the teacher responses on the post-workshop evaluation surveys (Siskin Children’s Institute 2006). A frequent comment focused on educators’ feelings that the workshop provided them

Children Learning about Disabilities

Often, children are curious about similarities and differences they notice about one another. The Creative Discovery Museum has created a Kids Like You, Kids Like Me exhibit to help young children learn about disabilities. Many of the techniques parallel those used in the teacher workshop—such as simulation experiences using the interactive exhibit, conversations with people who have disabilities, and a resource packet teachers can use to continue the curriculum at school.

Through simulation activities provided by the Kids Like You, Kids Like Me interactive exhibit, children can experience a day in the life of a child with a disability. A child may simulate a communication disability and have the opportunity to use a voice output device to communicate what he would like to eat while playing in the kitchen area. Another child in the bedroom area may simulate having a physical disability by using adaptive tools to zip up her jacket.

Mirroring the teacher workshop, the exhibit celebrates the similarities and differences of all children. And students learn, as did the teachers, to widen their awareness of disabilities and practice inclusion in classroom activity and play.



with a more balanced awareness about the world of disabilities and a sense of self-assurance.

When Melissa McCreary participated in the workshop, she knew that a student with a disability would join her classroom in the fall semester. Her comments reflect the kind of empowerment the workshop can convey: “As a teacher, I could easily understand that a child is different, but I didn’t know how to help a child with a disability not feel out of place in my classroom.” She said that she also appreciated the opportunity to network with other general education teachers, special education teachers, and people with disabilities, and she realized the value of collaboration between these groups.

At the close of the third workshop day, teachers receive a teaching manual to help them bring these experiences into their schools and classrooms to promote disability awareness. The manual includes fact sheets on disabilities, information about disability awareness curricula, and 24 classroom awareness activities to develop students’ awareness. One activity example is a survey children can conduct to assess the accessibility of their classroom. Included are tips for teachers that will help them make the environment friendlier for children who have a disability.

Because of the unique learning environment—combining lecture, collaboration, and simulation—workshop participants explore disabilities from a variety of perspectives, including the everyday lives, successes, and challenges of persons with disabilities as well as the laws guaranteeing equal rights and protection and society’s common misconceptions about and stereotyping of individuals with disabilities. This infusion method brings about a fuller understanding of disability and a sense of empowerment to educate others about disability differences.

Through lecture, collaboration, and simulation, workshop participants explore disabilities from a variety of perspectives.

Conclusion

The core message in Kids Like You, Kids Like Me is that all children and adults need and want to have friends and enjoy fun experiences, but each may go about this differently—some because of their disabili-

ties. Through workshops and discovery programs, the Siskin Children's Institute (www.siskin.org) and Creative Discovery Museum (www.cdm-fun.org) share the hope that their community will gain a deeper understanding of people with disabilities and an awareness of the similarities all people share. Visit their Web sites for more information.

References

- Herbert, J. T. 2000. Simulation as a learning method to facilitate disability awareness. *The Journal of Experiential Education* 23 (1): 5-11.
- Siskin Children's Institute. 2006. Kids Like You, Kids Like Me teacher workshop surveys. Chattanooga, TN: Author.
- Tertell, E.A., S.M. Klein, & J.L. Jewett, eds. 1998. *When teachers reflect: Journeys toward effective, inclusive practice*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

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Resources for Implementing a Disability Awareness Program

Online

Circle of Inclusion provides information about and demonstrates effective practices of inclusive education programs for children from birth to eight. www.circleofinclusion.org

Community Resources for Independence is helpful for teaching awareness/sensitivity; go to “Disability etiquette.” www.crinet.org/interact.php

Education World searches the Web for sites that provide information about disabilities and suggest activities for classroom use. www.education-world.com/a_lesson/lesson115.shtml

Kid’s Quest on Disability and Health is full of disability-related activities for children. www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/kids/default.htm

NAEYC endorses DEC/CEC’s position statement on inclusion as a value and supports the right of all children, regardless of their diverse abilities, to participate actively in natural settings within their communities: www.naeyc.org/about/positions/pdf/PSINC98.pdf

Also see **Beyond the Journal—Young Children** on the Web, September 2006, “The Universal Design of Early Education: Moving Forward for All Children.” www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/200609

National Coalition on Auditory Processing Disorders offers simulations for experiencing auditory processing difficulties. www.ncapd.org

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities gives information on children with disabilities, IDEA, and more. www.nichcy.org

PBS offers simulation activities on a variety of learning disabilities. www.pbs.org/wgbh/misunderstoodminds

Pediatric Neurology.com provides simulations for experiencing ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and Asperger’s (a milder form of autism). www.pediatricneurology.com/adhd2.htm

Print

Disability Awareness in the Classroom: A Resource Tool for Teachers and Students, by Lorie Levison and Isabelle St. Onge. 1999. Springfield, IL: C.C. Thomas. Helps reduce the discomfort and alienation of teachers and students toward others with disabilities and dispel misconceptions leading to stereotypes.

Everybody’s Different: Understanding and Changing Our Reactions to Disabilities, by Nancy B. Miller and Catherine C. Sammons. 1999. Baltimore: Brookes. Features awareness activities that show us how we see differences; explores reactions to and beliefs about disabilities.

Kids with Special Needs: Information and Activities to Promote Awareness and Understanding, by Beronica Getskow and Dee Konczal; illus. Beverly Armstrong. 1996. Huntington Beach, CA: Creative Teaching Press. Learning Works sourcebook for parents and teachers of children with special needs.

Teaching Kids with Learning Difficulties in the Regular Classroom: Ways to Challenge and Motivate Struggling Students to Achieve Proficiency with Required Standards, rev. ed., by Susan Winebrenner. 2006. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing. Gathers teacher-tested techniques and easy-to-use activities. Also available as CD-ROM or video package.

Classroom Games/Activities for Celebrating Children's Similarities and Differences

I Like My Friends

Engage children in talking about the kinds of things they have in common with their friends (like eating pizza) and things that are different or unique about each of them (for instance, Jennie has curly hair and gets to wear fun hair-dos; Tommy likes to listen to rap music and uses a special device to activate the CD player). To explore this further, the group can play the game Alike and Different.

- Have the children form a seated circle with one child standing in the center. Explain that the person in the middle says, "I like friends who ____" and gives an example ("who wear glasses").
- Everyone having the named trait, plus the person in the center, moves quickly to claim a vacated place in the circle. The remaining person standing becomes the one in the middle and begins the game again.
- During the game reinforce the idea that all children have certain similarities as well as differences that make them unique. A great way to wrap up the game might be to ask the children to imagine their entire group running like crazy if someone were to say, "I love friends who like to have fun!"
- Lead a follow-up discussion by posing questions such as these: What did you learn about your friends from playing this game? What things did you have in common with or different from your friends? Were there more similarities or differences? What would the world be like if we all were the same?

Web of Friends

- Children sit in a large circle. The teacher begins by explaining strengths, how everyone has them—things each of us is good at and that we like compliments on. Give examples. Ask them to think of things they like about the different people sitting in the circle.
- Hold one end of a long string and toss the other to one child in the circle while naming aloud a characteristic liked in the person and giving a compliment. (Examples: Julie can swim really fast; I like watching her move through the water; James loves games and always includes everyone.)
- As a string is tossed out to each participant, he or she holds on to it tightly, creating a weblike structure of strengths.
- With everyone holding a section of the string, talk about how this builds a web of friends. Help the children see that a group that works and cooperates together uses the strengths and talents of all to support each other and to benefit from the time together. Emphasize the importance of telling our friends what we admire and see in them.
- Ask one participant to let go of his or her string. Gradually have others let go of their strings. Ask, "What has happened to our web of friends now?" (Children may answer: "Not strong," "We aren't working together," "Broken.")
- Lead a follow-up discussion by posing questions such as, What did you find out about the importance of cooperating with your friends? What happens when friendships are not strong? Why is it important to focus on the strengths of our friends?

Making New Friends

- Gather children together as a group to make posters about themselves and things they like to do. Titles could include "My Favorite Things" or "All about Me."
- Brainstorm with the children some of the categories they might include, like favorite color, game they like the most, season they enjoy, most popular food at their home, trip that was especially fun, a favorite home they've lived in, and so on.
- When posters are finished, pair each child with another child to talk about their posters and the similarities and differences in their experiences and their likes.
- Follow up with a group discussion, using questions like What similarities did you have with others in the group? Is it OK to be different in some ways from a new friend? Why or why not?

Helping Children Develop Sensitivity to Disabilities of Others

At home in daily routines: Activity 1

Focus: Visual or hearing disability

Teacher introduction

Talk with the children about the kinds of daily routines, activities, and interactions they experience with family at home. Explore what it means to be blind or have a visual disability or to have hearing loss. Explain that there are different degrees of vision and hearing loss and that children with visual disabilities and/or hearing disabilities can still do many of the *same* fun children's activities, just a little differently.

Next, to help children experience what it is like to have a disability, let children pretend they are at home and cannot see or hear the same way they do now.

Experiences

- At their desks/tables, blindfold children and explain that they are going to have a snack of crackers and juice. Then ask them to open the crackers and juice boxes and enjoy the snack, keeping their eyes covered.
- Turn off the lights and give children dark sunglasses or eyeglasses with paper taped over the lenses. Ask them to sit in pairs and try reading to each other from a book with small print.
- Have the children wear earmuffs/earplugs while trying to listen to a conversation between some of their friends. Once the conversation is over, ask the children to repeat the conversation they heard.

Materials

blindfolds (scarves or bandanas)

juice boxes with straws

packages of crackers

dark sunglasses or eyeglasses with paper or tape covering the lenses

storybooks

earmuffs/earplugs

Follow-up discussion

How did this activity make you feel?

What were the things you were able to do *the same*?

What were the things you did *differently* to accomplish the activity?

What have you learned about people with visual and hearing disabilities?

Children's books as resources

The Secret Code, by Dana Meachen Rau, illus. by Bari Weissman. 1998. Danbury, CT: Scholastic/Children's Press-Grolier. A child who is blind explains to classmates about his books being written in a secret code—Braille.

Looking Out for Sarah, by Glenna Lang. 2001. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge. Through the eyes of the guide dog Perry, readers see the busy life of his owner who is blind, Sarah, a musician and teacher, and they see the remarkable bond between person and dog.

Moses Goes to a Concert, by Isaac Millman. 2002. Reprint ed. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Moses and his friends, who are deaf, go to a concert and "hear" the musical sounds (percussion) through vibrations.

Helping Children Develop Sensitivity to Disabilities of Others

In classroom participation: Activity 2

Focus: Communication or cognitive/learning disability

Teacher introduction

Review with children the kinds of things they typically do at school in their classroom. Talk about what it means to have a communication disability, explaining that some people may communicate differently by using sign language or other devices. Explain to children what it means to have a cognitive/learning disability. Emphasize that all children can learn and do many of the same activities, but in different ways. Give some examples.

Tell the children that in their first experience, they will pretend they cannot speak. The second and third experiences, simulating learning disability, will challenge them to think in a different way to complete a task.

Experiences

- Each child, with a partner, will not speak but instead will use gestures, facial expressions, or any other creative form of communication to make a request or tell his or her partner something. Each partner will guess what the other is trying to say. Then partners switch roles.
- Children use their nondominant hand, the one not normally used for writing, to write their names, addresses, and phone numbers. Providing different-textured materials to write on can make this task even more challenging.
- Children take turns trying to read aloud a simple page of a storybook by looking only at its reflection in a mirror.

Materials

paper/pencil
storybook
mirror

Follow-up discussion

How did this activity make you feel?

What were the things you were able to do *the same*?

What were the things you did *differently* to accomplish the task?

What have you learned about people with communication disabilities and cognitive/learning disabilities?

Children's books as resources

We'll Paint the Octopus Red, by Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen, illus. by Pam DeVito. 1998.

Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House. Emma awaits a sibling's birth, eager for all the things she will do with the baby. When Baby Isaac is born with Down syndrome, Emma's father explains that Isaac will be able to do all the things Emma wants, but simply at a slower pace. (*The Best Worst Brother* is a sequel, as Emma grows in understanding.)

Helping Children Develop Sensitivity to Disabilities of Others

In the community: Activity 3

Focus: Physical disability

Teacher introduction

Ask the children what kinds of things they like to do for fun in their neighborhood and in the community. Talk with them about what it means to have a physical disability and the barriers they notice in their community. Help children understand that there are a variety of physical disabilities. Provide some examples. Explain that some people with physical disabilities may use adaptive/special equipment to help them get around, and ask the children to come up with some examples (like wheelchairs, leg braces, walkers, glasses, computers, adapted balls [designed with wide, open holes that make them easy to catch with one hand], and so forth). Convey the idea that children with physical disabilities can still have fun doing many of the same activities; they just might have to do some things a little differently.

Suggest to the children that you would like them to explore how it might feel having a physical limitation by pretending they can't move their bodies the way they typically do.

Experiences

- Let each child try walking from one area to another with their thighs or legs taped/strapped together. Traveling from the classroom to the playground helps children experience changing surfaces and simulates being out in the community, away from the security of home or classroom.
- With one arm tied to their chests (or tucked inside their shirtsleeves), children can try to bounce a ball or play catch with a friend.
- Putting socks over their hands and attempting to tie their shoes or zip up a coat lets children know what it might be like for a classmate with a disability to get ready to go outside and play with friends.

Materials

masking tape/strap
 shirt with sleeves
 bouncing ball
 socks, shoes that tie, or a coat

Follow-up discussion

How did this activity make you feel?
 What things were you were able to do *the same*?
 What things did you do *differently* to accomplish the task?
 What did you learn about people with physical disabilities?

Children's books as resources

All Kinds of Friends, Even Green! Photographs and text by Ellen B. Senisi. 2002. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House. A young boy with a disability goes about in a wheelchair and meets up with Zahi, an iguana who also has a disability, having lost her back toes.