



INCLUSIVE PRESCHOOL...IS COOL!

Sam Broyles is an old hand at being “just one of the kids.” A kindergartener with Down syndrome, this 5-year-old knows how to fit in with the group. Taking turns? No problem. Knowing routines? Check. Following directions? Piece of cake.

All that kindergarten confidence, skill, and success is firmly rooted in the year he spent in an inclusive preschool, says his mom, Jessica Broyles. “His year before kindergarten was truly inclusive,” she says, noting it was the first year the school implemented a new preschool model for *all* children. Instead of spending part of the week in a special education classroom and part in the regular class, Sam spent the whole school week with 12 typically developing classmates and one other child with disabilities.

Preparing for Preschool

Before Sam went to inclusive preschool, Jessica was a little nervous about how things would really work out. After all, “you’re treated like everyone else,” she says. “You get a little help, but you have to follow the rules of the class. You’re not catered to like you are in a special education setting.” Would Sam be able to succeed?

She had other concerns as well. She wondered how the teacher would feel about this inclusive model. “Sam can be a lot of extra work,” Jessica says. She worried about whether he’d make friends, and “I wondered if he would learn

enough, if they’d be able to make sure things weren’t taught at too fast of a pace.”

On the other hand, she knew there would be benefits. “Sam learns best from typical peers. He learns from watching,” she explains. “I knew he would be going to kindergarten in an inclusive school, and I wanted him to learn how to function—to follow routines and directions, participate in activities, and fit in. It has to start young.” After weighing the apprehensions and the advantages, Jessica and Sam’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) team believed the inclusive preschool would be the best thing for her son.



Sam Broyles

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A meeting with the teacher just before the school year began helped ease some of Jessica's concerns. The teacher made it clear that she was excited about having an inclusive environment—and that inclusion extended to more than just having children with and without disabilities. The class also had children from many countries. "Nobody stood out, because everyone was different in some way," Jessica says. "The kids didn't see differences or judge them. Everyone was really welcoming."

She especially liked the fact that she and the teacher agreed that an inclusive classroom would prepare Sam well for kindergarten. "She said, 'every kind of kid he'll run into in kindergarten is here,'" Jessica recalls. That experience would be invaluable.

Reaping the Rewards

"Sam had a lot of support to be part of the classroom," Jessica says. In addition to the preschool teacher and an assistant teacher, Sam had a part-time special education teacher and a paraprofessional who helped him learn to follow routines, sit for story time, stand in line, play with other children, take turns, and share in front of the class. In short, he learned how to be part of a class.

Sam's peers helped a lot, too. Although the special education teacher typically provided services in the classroom as part of whatever was going on, she occasionally thought Sam needed additional practice on certain skills. At those times, a typically developing peer would join Sam outside the classroom and the two would play games that enhanced those skills. Other times, if Sam

needed help transitioning from one activity to another, the school would have a friend buddy up with him.

The benefits of an inclusive preschool program for Sam became clear fairly early. "He was comfortable in the group," Jessica says. "He loved preschool. He was happy to go. That's how we got him dressed in the morning. He loved the other kids. It was such a social learning experience for him. It was so important."

That importance became evident only a few months after being in the inclusive classroom. In testing between the summer before preschool and January 2009, Sam had a 10 percentile jump in speech. "It's a more dramatic jump than usual," says Jessica, who attributes much of the gain to his inclusive preschool experience.

Sam's classmates benefited from the inclusive experience as well, gaining compassion and awareness. "Even though they couldn't always understand him, they realized he was just a kid who liked to play games, and they included him," Jessica says.

Sharing Suggestions

For families considering an inclusive preschool for their children with disabilities, Jessica is happy to share these suggestions:

- Look for a school that has a philosophy to be inclusive and that has experience with children who have special needs. If inclusion is part of the school's philosophy, parents who send their typical kids to that school

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-Jessica Broyles

What is an Inclusive Preschool—and How Can You Find One?

An inclusive preschool is a place where children with and without disabilities learn and play together. Such a setting gives children with disabilities time to learn and practice their skills with typically developing peers. Depending on a child's disability and needs, early childhood special education services may be provided in the classroom all the time or just some of the time.

Your Individualized Education Program (IEP) team can help you select an inclusive preschool. Your options may

include Head Start programs, community preschools, private preschools or child-care programs, and district-run learning or kindergarten readiness programs.

When writing your child's IEP, be sure to ask questions about the proposed setting. It's a good idea to take time to visit the classroom to see if it is an appropriate setting for your child.

If you have questions about inclusive preschool options for your child, please call PACER Center and ask to speak with a parent advocate.

probably share that philosophy, too, and the school will be welcoming. The more welcoming it is, the easier it's going to be for a child with disabilities.

- Consider choosing an inclusive neighborhood preschool so your child can make a few friends he or she can have in kindergarten and beyond. Having friends can make transitions easier and really help with social inclusion.
- Make a family commitment that you'll work hard at home to reinforce the lessons being learned at school.
- Learn about your child's rights under special education laws, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
- Consider joining the district's Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC). A SEAC is a group that provides input on special education issues to its local school district.
- Take advantage of the many workshops PACER offers. We attended workshops on IDEA and parent advocacy, and they helped us immensely. It's so important to be educated about these issues before your child even begins school.

With his year of inclusive preschool behind him, Sam is thriving in kindergarten. He's still "just one of the kids," he has friends, and he's eagerly tackling his newest challenge: learning to write his name.

New Publication on Inclusive Early Childhood Education

"Impact: Feature Issue on Early Childhood Education and Children with Disabilities" is a free publication that addresses how early childhood professionals and families can provide quality, inclusive early childhood education for young children with and without disabilities.

This edition includes an article on KidSmart, a national early childhood technology program of IBM and PACER designed to help children with and without disabilities learn in inclusive environments. Other articles include reflections from parents, practical strategies from researchers and practitioners, notes from innovative inclusive early childhood programs from around the country, and a range of resources for families and professionals.

Published by the University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration, it's available online at <http://ici.umn.edu/products/impact/221>. You also may request a free print copy by calling the Institute's Publications Office at 612-624-4512 or e-mailing icipub@umn.edu.

Say Hello to PACER's Baby Welcome Project

Every new baby deserves a warm welcome—and PACER's Baby Welcome Project offers a friendly greeting to all newborns at North Memorial, the project's pilot site. A growth cart and magnetic picture frame with PACER's phone number and Web site are given to each family. If parents there or anywhere in Minnesota have an infant with a disability and they call PACER for support, they also receive a larger Baby Welcome basket that includes diapers and other gifts. Now that's a warm welcome! Learn more at PACER.org/babywelcome.



TRY THESE WEB RESOURCES TO HELP YOUNG CHILDREN

If you're looking for new ideas on how to help a young child with disabilities play and learn, the Internet can be a gold mine. Whether you're a parent or professional, the following Web sites can help you find information about toys, literacy, technology, family-centered supports and services, and best practices.

Center for Early Literacy Learning (CELL) **earlyliteracylearning.org**

CELL offers a series of practice guides that parents and professionals can use to create fun literacy experiences for infants, toddlers, or preschoolers. CELL is a research-to-practice technical assistance center funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), Research to Practice Division.



Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) **vanderbilt.edu/csefel**

Funded by the Office of Head Start and the Child Care Bureau, CSEFEL promotes the social-emotional development and school readiness of children from birth to age 5. It disseminates research and evidence-based practices to early childhood programs across the country.

Get Ready to Read! **getreadytoread.org**

This site offers research-based strategies that parents, early education professionals, and child-care providers can use to help children learn to read and write. The goal is to ensure that all children have opportunities to become successful readers. Get Ready to Read! is an initiative of the National Center for Learning Disabilities.

IBM KidSmart Early Learning Program **kidsmartearlylearning.org**

This site includes a guide for parents to encourage early learning at home and a section to help preschool teachers use technology to support learning in their classrooms. Offered in nine languages, it was created in collaboration with the Center for Children and Technology, Bank Street College of Education, and United Way.

IBM KidSmart/Project KITE **PACER.org/pacerwebinars**

This site includes free archived Webinars on early childhood assistive technology and early learning software found on KidSmart Young Explorer computers. Geared for professionals, the Webinars grew out of a 2009 partnership between PACER and IBM's KidSmart program to help bridge the digital divide for Hispanic children. They were developed through

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trainings based on PACER's Project KITE (Kids Included through Technology are Enriched). A technology training curriculum for parents and teachers of young children with disabilities, Project KITE promotes inclusion for children with disabilities through the use of technology in early childhood classrooms and homes. It began as a model project funded by OSEP.

Let's Play Project **letsplay.buffalo.edu**

The Let's Play Project provides information about selecting toys for play, finding toys for children with disabilities, adapting toys to make them easier to use, locating specially designed toys, and identifying other resources to promote play. The Let's Play Project was a model demonstration project initially funded by OSEP.

National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (NECTAC) **nectac.org**

NECTAC's mission is to strengthen service systems to ensure that young children with disabilities and their families receive and benefit from high-quality, culturally appropriate, and family-centered supports and services. It is supported by OSEP.

Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children (TACSEI) **tacsei.org**

Using best-practices research, TACSEI creates free online products to help professionals improve the social-emotional outcomes for young children with delays or disabilities. It is supported by OSEP.

Tots 'n Tech **tnt.asu.edu**

This Web site provides up-to-date information and resources about assistive technology for infants and toddlers. Information is provided for families, early intervention providers, and states. The Tots 'n Tech Research Institute is a collaboration between Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia and Arizona State University in Tempe.

We Can Play! **ataccess.org/resources/wcp/endpoint.html**

This site offers accessible play ideas, including outdoor activities and toy adaptations. The mission of the Alliance for Technology Access (ATA) is to increase the use of technology by children and adults with disabilities and functional limitations.

For more ideas on assistive technology or other resources for your child with disabilities, call PACER's Simon Technology Center at 952-838-9000 or visit PACER.org/stc.



PACER ANSWERS FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

As you navigate the world of early intervention and special education, you may have questions about who the players are and why certain decisions are made about services. Judy Swett, one of PACER's early childhood parent advocates, answers those questions.

Q. What roles do the members of my daughter's Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) team play?

A. The IFSP team is made up of people with the skills necessary to help your child with her specific disabilities, needs, and goals.

Every team is unique and includes the parents. Some of the professionals on your daughter's team may include:

- An **occupational therapist (OT)**, who understands the fine motor development issues that may affect your child's ability to pick up an object or self-feed. The OT also knows how to adapt toys and learning materials to support your child's play and learning, address feeding difficulties, and encourage self-help skills such as dressing.
- A **physical therapist (PT)**, who knows about muscle tone and movement patterns that affect balance and walking. The PT can recommend adaptive equipment such as wheelchairs, advise you about options such as limb bracing and gait training, and assist with concerns such as balance or walking.



- A **speech therapist**, who knows about oral-motor function and feeding difficulties. With an extensive knowledge of speech and language development, the speech therapist can recommend adaptive communication devices and help with feeding issues.
- An **early childhood special education (ECSE) teacher**, who knows about young children's early cognition, pre-academic and problem-solving skills, and early play development. The ECSE teacher can suggest ways to enhance cognitive skills through play and other daily activities. He or she also can help a child-care provider or other early education staff determine how to modify the classroom curriculum and daily activities to encourage cognitive development.

Q. My son has received a medical diagnosis of autism, but the school district evaluated him and says he doesn't qualify for special education services. Why not?

A. Schools do not use medical diagnoses as the basis for determining whether a child qualifies for special education services. Instead, they look at how the child functions and learns at school and base their decision on that evaluation. When conducting the evaluation, the school district must consider the results of any private assessment and diagnosis, but they are not bound by it.

If you have questions regarding any aspect of early childhood services or resources, please call PACER Center and ask to speak with a parent advocate.



HAVE FUN WITH LETTERS

It's never too early to start building your child's literacy skills—and the Center for Early Literacy Learning (CELL) can help. It offers parents and professionals free practice guides that show how you can use everyday activities to encourage infants, toddlers, and preschoolers to listen, talk, and learn the building blocks for early literacy. You can learn more about CELL practice guides at earlyliteracylearning.org/pgparents.php.

Here is an excerpt* from one of the guides you can use with your toddler.

What's Your Letter?

Before children can begin to read or write, they need to become familiar with the look and shape of letters. Interacting with letters they can see and touch—letters with different textures, colors, and sizes—helps children become interested in and comfortable with the alphabet. Providing alphabet toys for your child and encouraging his interest through praise and conversation will help him begin to understand the way our alphabet is used and organized. Playing with alphabet toys can help toddlers feel confident about learning.

What is the practice?

Interacting with your child around a wide variety of alphabet toys makes letter learning fun. These toys can be alphabet blocks, magnetic or foam letters, alphabet puzzles, or any other toys with the letters prominently displayed so your toddler has many occasions to look at them.



What does the practice look like?

Let your toddler play with letter-shaped cookie cutters in damp sand, cornmeal, play dough, or real dough. Cut kitchen sponges into letter shapes and show her how to use them as bathtub toys or as stamps with finger paint. When you enjoy these kinds of activities together while talking to your toddler about what he's doing, you're making good use of alphabet toys. Let your child arrange magnetic alphabet letters on the refrigerator door, stack alphabet blocks, string large alphabet beads, and much



more. Each play time with alphabet toys helps him become more familiar and comfortable with letters.

How do you do the practice?

Make play with alphabet toys fun for your toddler by providing a variety of materials, praising her efforts, and following her lead.

- Help your child start to learn the letters in her name by pointing out the blocks, stamps, or other materials that have those letters. Praise her when she finds or recognizes them.
- Point out that each letter toy your child is playing with stands for a sound. For example, when your child hands you the block with the letter B on it, name the letter and its sound, and encourage him to do the same.
- Try to avoid making alphabet toys seem too “hard” or too much like work. Even if he doesn't seem to be paying attention to the letters themselves, they are still becoming more familiar to him, which will make them easier to learn later on.



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(Alternate format is available upon request.)

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How do you know the practice worked?

- Does your child play enthusiastically with alphabet toys?
- Does your child point out familiar letters on his toys or anywhere else he sees them?
- Does your child imitate you by naming sounds and letters when you are playing with alphabet toys together?

PACER is a partner with CELL, which is a major initiative of the Center for Evidence-Based Practices at the Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute.

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