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# Introduction

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*What Every Teacher Should Know about Students with Special Needs* was written to provide you, the teacher of a child with a special need, with an easy-to-use reference on a myriad of special needs you may encounter in your career. Based on up-to-date research and over 40 years of combined classroom experience, this book gives you quick “tours” of each special need and then offers positive ways to help children with special needs reach their full potential. The dozens of practical strategies listed for each special need will not only help you guide these children to succeed in your classroom, they will also help other students learn to appreciate what these children *can* do, rather than focus on what they cannot. Children with special needs have much to teach all of us about diversity, patience, and compassion. Although gifted children are not “special needs” children according to the most common use of this term, their needs are special in the sense that they are unique. A look at giftedness and the needs of the gifted child rounds out this guide to teaching children with special needs.

Unless stated otherwise, when reporting incidence and other statistics we have used the information given in the revised fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), known as the DSM-IV-TR. We also follow the DSM-IV-TR when we give names of specific disorders and discuss their diagnostic criteria.

## **Our Philosophy**

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As a teacher of a child with a special need, you must have additional knowledge and tools beyond the basics to use the 6 or 7 hours per day you spend with the child to the fullest. Indeed, these hours give you the opportunity to have a positive impact on the child's chances to succeed as an adult in our increasingly stressful and diverse society.

You may be thinking, “How do I individualize my approach for the child with a special need while balancing the needs of the rest of the children?” The answer is to be positive and, as alluded to earlier, to make the child’s presence in your classroom benefit all your students. Certainly, many of the suggestions in this book are practical for all students no matter their abilities or needs. For example, working in small, cooperative groups of peers is a proven strategy for enhancing both academic learning and social skills development in other children. Consistent rewards, consequences, and classroom routines are also vital to eliciting appropriate behavior from other children. The list could go on and on. This continuity between accommodations for the child with a special need and the requirements of her classmates smoothes the path to better teaching and more learning for *each* student.

In addition, a positive prevention and intervention approach does more than create a positive learning atmosphere: It also builds self-esteem, empowers students to take more responsibility for their learning and behavior, and reinforces their strengths. We firmly believe that a positive, individualized approach builds a foundation of feelings of success and competency. In turn, this solid foundation opens the door to more learning and—most important—love of learning.

As you strive to create accommodations through which the child may feel successful and competent, keep in mind that this is not “spoiling” the child. The child with a special need has enough to deal with! For example, you may find it hard to allow a child with an emotional disability to do fewer math problems than his classmates. However, if the child becomes so overwhelmed that he cannot function, he learns nothing. Better to build level of effort and completion slowly than not to build it at all. Even a gifted child has emotional and social needs equal to or greater than those of his peers; it is important not to neglect these.

This book gives you insightful explanations and practical examples to help you understand the motives and needs of a child with special needs, and in turn help you to motivate the child. Choose and adapt the interventions you, in your professional judgment, feel will contribute most to the individual child’s success. We hope that—whether you are a student teacher or seasoned veteran; special educator, regular classroom teacher, or college professor; administrator; or parent—this book will be the next best thing to having an expert by your side.

## **How to Use This Book**

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Each chapter in this book is devoted to one special need, and each chapter is divided into seven main sections:

- ◆ *Definition:* Defines and describes the special need

- ◆ *Incidence*: Provides research-based statistics on the prevalence of the special need
- ◆ *Characteristics*: Specifies how the special need may manifest itself
- ◆ *Educational implications*: Gives a general overview of how the special need may impact the child's ability to learn and function in the classroom and of how you may meet the child's needs
- ◆ *Classroom management strategies*: The core of each chapter, providing classroom-tested, teacher-friendly tips for helping the child succeed in your classroom in the areas of academics, social skills development, behavior, and other applicable areas. The following general recommendations apply to all children, but especially to those with disabilities:

Approach the student without embarrassment, fear, or pity. Focus instead on the child's potential and gifts.

Avoid guessing what is wrong if you suspect a problem (either socially or academically). Be very direct, asking the child, "May I be of assistance?" instead of "May I help you?" The former helps the child focus on what he can do for himself, while the latter may encourage dependence.

Read and learn about the disability. It is important to know as much as possible and to try to be empathetic about what the child and family are experiencing.

Because each child is unique, make every effort to ensure that any academic goals set for the child match the child's intellectual ability and functional level.

A small but not insignificant point: Air-conditioning in the classroom in hot and humid weather makes the environment more conducive to learning for everyone.

- ◆ *Organizations*: A list of organizations, including Web sites and E-mail addresses where available, to which you and the child's family may turn for additional information and support. In addition to organizations specific to each chapter topic, two organizations are good sources of information for all:

ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education  
 Council for Exceptional Children  
 1920 Association Drive  
 Reston, VA 22091-1589  
 800-328-0272 (voice/TTY)  
 Web site: [www.cec.sped.org/ericec](http://www.cec.sped.org/ericec)  
 E-mail: [ericec@cec.sped.org](mailto:ericec@cec.sped.org)

National Information Center for Children and Youth  
with Disabilities (NICHY)

P.O. Box 1492

Washington, DC 20013-1492

202-884-8200 (voice/TTY)

800-695-0285 (voice/TTY)

Web site: [www.nichy.org](http://www.nichy.org)

E-mail: [nichy@aed.org](mailto:nichy@aed.org)

- ◆ *References and bibliography*: A list of the resources used to write the chapter and a handy guide to further reading

## **Special Education Legislation**

To put the suggestions in this book in context, it is helpful to understand a bit about the current legislation under which special services are provided. Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA), is the legislation that originally set forth federal procedural safeguards for children with disabilities and their parents, and outlined the foundation upon which current special education practices rest. Reauthorizations of and amendments to the EHA have expanded the way special education services are provided, and to whom. In 1990, the title of the law was changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA '97, the most recent reauthorization and amendment of the act, lists the following specific conditions as qualifying a child for special education services:

- ◆ Autism
- ◆ Deaf-blindness
- ◆ Deafness
- ◆ Emotional disturbance
- ◆ Hearing impairment
- ◆ Mental retardation
- ◆ Multiple disabilities
- ◆ Orthopedic impairment
- ◆ Other health impairment
- ◆ Specific learning disability
- ◆ Speech or language impairment
- ◆ Traumatic brain injury
- ◆ Visual impairment including blindness

Some children do not qualify for special services under IDEA, but they may be able to receive services under Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act. Section 504, as it is commonly known, is a civil rights statute enacted in 1973 to prevent discrimination against all individuals with disabilities in programs receiving federal funds, including schools. Under this statute, a child may meet the criteria for special assistance. For example, even though a child with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) may not be covered under federal law, that child may be entitled to receive classroom accommodations.

Special services under the IDEA are documented in an Individualized Educational Program (IEP). The IEP includes both short-term and long-term goals, along with specific information about how and where services will be provided. All students in special education are required to have an IEP designed to meet their needs. A Section 504 plan is a similar, though less rigorous, individual plan that spells out specific accommodations for the child with special needs who does not qualify for special services under federal law.

## Assessment

Before receiving an IEP or a Section 504 plan, each child with a special need must receive a comprehensive assessment. This assessment guides educators in identification and placement of the child with special needs, as well as in planning appropriate educational programs and interventions.

- ◆ *Medical diagnosis:* Determination of primary diagnosis by a medical doctor in cases where a medical problem is involved (e.g., visual and hearing impairment, AD/HD, orthopedic and other health impairment)

A person appointed to oversee the assessment process, usually the school psychologist, will be involved in the following procedures:

- ◆ *Review of cumulative reports and records:* A complete review of all the child's report cards, attendance records, standardized test scores, and so forth, to determine possible patterns of behavior
- ◆ *Teacher interviews:* Meetings with the classroom teacher to obtain information about the child's basic intellectual, social, and academic performance
- ◆ *Parent interviews:* Face-to-face meetings with parents to determine essential background history that may be essential for appropriate diagnosis and educational planning

- ◆ *Clinical interviews*: Interviews with the child to observe, listen, and make an initial assessment as to where problems may lie
- ◆ *Observations*: Watching and recording the child's behavior in the classroom and in other school settings to verify that information from interviews is accurate and to identify any other issues
- ◆ *Parent and teacher rating scales*: In the case of the child with AD/HD or other attentional problems, parent and teacher scores on inventories designed to help identify the disorder and assess the child's response to medication

Valuable information is also obtained from testing. Some of these assessments must be administered by the school psychologist. In other cases, a classroom teacher, special educator, speech and language therapist, or occupational therapist will be involved.

- ◆ *Sensory functioning assessment*: Tests of hearing and vision, as well as assessment of medical problems: bone, joint, and muscle problems, and health related problems such as allergies, cardiovascular problems, kidney problems, or infectious diseases (e.g., AIDS)
- ◆ *Intelligence tests*: Standardized measures of a child's intellectual ability, involving assessment of performance on a number of tasks
- ◆ *Achievement tests*: Standardized tests that evaluate a child's academic knowledge by comparing it with an average level of knowledge for the child's grade
- ◆ *Perceptual tests*: Measures of the child's abilities to extract information from objects, people, and events in the environment
- ◆ *Visual-motor integration tests*: Tests of the child's ability to synchronize visual perceptual input with the use of the hands and fingers
- ◆ *Psychological tests*: Measures of a child's affective issues, attitudes and interests, personality, and self-concept
- ◆ *Adaptive behavior tests*: Tests of a child's mastery of the many skills required for independent functioning in areas socially prescribed for a given life stage

## **Students with Multiple Special Needs**

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While many children with special needs may have only one special need (e.g., visual impairment; chapter 6), some will have multiple special needs, for example, Down syndrome (chapter 9) with severe