

Assisting the Social Development of Children with CdLS

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For young children with CdLS, family and school settings are primary areas where social and communication skills are learned and developed. During a workshop at the Foundation's 1996 conference in Tennessee, Dr. Samuel Odom, of the John F. Kennedy Center in Nashville, discussed ways families and educators may promote a child's social development by providing opportunities for inclusion in activities at home and at school.

For children in general, social competence -- meaning the ability to socially interact in an effective, responsive and appropriate way -- starts even before a child learns to speak. With children who speak very little, the time parents spend interacting with their child helps prepare them for future interactions with adults or other children.

Interactive games that are done just for fun, like patty-cake or peek-a-boo, help develop social skills that require an understanding of taking turns during an activity. Children pick up on the notion of what it means to take a turn, when parents or friends play games that leave an opening or a time slot for their child to respond.

Dr. Odom pointed out that it is also important for parents to talk to their very young children, even if they don't understand exactly what is being said. The experience of being around a talking, interactive adult is positive for children with or without special needs. Again, it is important that parents remember to take turns, either verbally or by their behavior, so the child may respond.

Parents may also imitate what their child is saying, even it is simply a sound or babbling. This kind of imitation early on in the first year and a half of a child's life is an especially productive way to gain a child's attention.

Children Helping Children

In creating programs in the area of social development, Dr. Odom found that an essential element is giving children with disabilities the opportunity to interact with socially competent peers -- peers who are good players and talkers.

"The developmental benefits are clear, he said, "for placing children with disabilities into settings with children without disabilities. Children who have good communication and social skills help children with special needs learn and practice ways of talking and communicating that they might not be able to do if other children in the classroom didn't have that kind of communication ability." In many cases, this is accomplished in a setting where teachers know how to set up an environment that will support children with special needs and foster the development of social relationships.



Social relationships can mean a broad number of things, but include friendships and acquaintanceships. For children with a range of special needs (not just children with CdLS), some are socially competent and can establish friendships or other positive social relationships with their peers. Other children, who may be more limited in their play, communication and social skills, can get support for developing those skills from other children.

Teachers can use different strategies to promote acquaintanceships and social relationships during school activities, including finger plays, songs and games that lead children without disabilities into positive interactions with other children who may not have a lot of social skills.

"Simon Says," a familiar childhood game, is excellent for encouraging this type of positive interaction among children. For example, if "Teresa" is a child with special needs in our classroom, and we want to make sure that other children in the class get to know her and interact with her, "Simon" can say, "Let's all smile at Teresa," or "Give a hug to the person sitting next to you." This type of activity in the classroom is both social and positive in nature, and can be turned around to involve children who might be left out.

Peer buddy systems are another approach that teachers use in the classroom, where children "buddy up" with a child with special needs for part of the day. Activities such as this should come out of the education plan that special education and early intervention teachers will develop for your child.

As parents, you can help your child develop positive social relationships, by making sure that social goals are a part of his or her special education or pre-school program. Let your child's teacher know that your child needs time during the day to be around other children who have typical social and communication skills.

Also, remember it is important to increase social opportunities for children outside of traditional preschool settings. Parents tell us that opportunities present themselves in playgroups, churches, summer camps, and even by playing with their brothers and sisters -- all extremely useful experiences for young children who are learning how to become interested in other people and their environment.

Dr. Odom found that opportunities for a child to gain social and communication skills in an inclusive setting are too important to be overlooked.

If you would like to talk to another parent who has had a positive experience with this type of program, give us a call. Also, a limited number of videotapes of Dr. Odom's presentation at the annual conference in Nashville are available for viewing. For more information, please contact the Foundation.

