

Guidelines for Evaluating a Pre-School Program for Children with CdLS

by Mary Morse, Ph.D.

Assessment

What types of assessments is the school going to use? What modifications to the testing procedures will be necessary -- especially if the child has no language (which means she needs non-language-based testing)? What help do the assessors, themselves, feel they need in testing?

Examining the Physical Environment

What does the room look like? Would you like to spend the day in the room? Is the room cheerful but not overwhelming? Is it loud and noisy or calm and welcoming?

Is the classroom, playground, and bathroom equipment safe (especially if the child is as small as many other children with CdLS)?

Are there a variety of play stations as, for example, arts/crafts, puzzle-reading area, kitchen corner and other make-believe areas.

Are the materials organized so that a child has a sense of knowing where to go to find certain types of toys? If the child mouths objects, what provisions can be made for keeping very small ones, which she might swallow, out of her reach rather than yelling at her?

Is there somewhere she can go when she needs a break from the other children -- a quiet, secure, safe place?

Do the children look happy and calm to you? Is the teacher relaxed? Is there sufficient staff for the number of children? If the program is only for children who have disabilities, then more staff will be needed. If she is the only child with disabilities, will she have a personal aide?

You could ask the teacher what kind of help she feels she needs to better understand a child who has CdLS.

Curriculum

What activities, exactly, do the children engage in? Are the activities appropriate for the age and developmental level of the child? For instance, age three is the time to play, to engage



in make-believe, to be creative in one's own way with paint, magic markers and other arts/crafts materials. It is the time to learn how to play with others. It is not a time for serious counting and learning the alphabet or drawing within lines. These kinds of cognitive tasks are developed in other ways in early schooling. Indeed, preschool is primarily to develop personally and socially through:

- accomplishing successful separation developing a sense of independence and self- confidence
- increasing impulse control and ability to accept limits
- increasing level of attention and involvement in activities (this is more easily accomplished when we start with the child's interests and shape them)
- improving ability to make transitions and follow routines
- developing increased self-help skills increasing positive interactions with peers
- developing gross motor skills, body awareness
- developing fine motor and perceptual skills
- developing cognitive skills

If the child is similar to other children with CdLS with whom I work, certain activities will be very difficult for her: for example, sitting and listening to a story if she does not understand language. Sometimes the children start to engage in all kinds of distracting activities, because they do not understand the stories and the experience has no meaning to them. If this is the situation with the child, what adaptations is the teacher willing to make so a problem will not occur?

Another common problem is the tendency to think all children can move from activity to activity at the same pace. It may be necessary to identify which activities are most important for the child to engage in and which ones are not necessary, at least initially. Rushing the children from one activity to another has been quite stressful for children with CdLS. On the other hand, allowing the majority of free time to be unstructured has also been a problem since many of the children do not know how to productively occupy themselves. So there really needs to be structure and organization in the sequence of activities, help in knowing what activities to participate in, teaching so she will know how to do the activity, time to experiment with the activity after the teaching, and time to have a break from all the effort. What other adaptations will be necessary to accommodate for this child? How will the staff identify these adaptations? I am particularly concerned with adaptations which might be necessary if the child has no language. She will need a method to express what she wants and the staff will need a way to tell her what is going to occur.

What therapies will she receive? Will the therapies be integrated within the activities of her school day?



Social Interaction

Will the program include children without disabilities who can be role models for the children who do have disabilities?

How will the staff facilitate interaction between the children?

My own philosophy is to plan ahead (be proactive) rather than wait for a problem to occur and then have to fix it (reactive). Those programs to whom I consult which have children with CdLS have, by and large, been pro-active and the children are doing well. The staff members have been willing to try new ideas and I, in turn, have learned from them.

