

## Importance of Social Interactions

The opportunity for social interactions with others is very important for the development of all children. Through social interactions, children begin to establish a sense of “self” and to learn what others expect of them. Although social interactions for very young children primarily occur within the family, as children grow and develop, they become more and more interested in playing and interacting with other children. When playing with others, children learn appropriate social behaviors, such as sharing, cooperating, and respecting the property of others. In addition, while interacting with their peers, young children learn communication, cognitive, and motor skills.

Most opportunities for social interactions among young children occur during play. This opportunity to play with others is critical if a child is to develop appropriate social skills. Therefore, encouraging children with disabilities and nondisabled children to play together is an extremely important part of instruction in integrated preschools. The children must have the opportunity to play together if they are to become friends. These friendships will help the nondisabled child form positive, accepting attitudes toward persons who are disabled. In addition, the child who is disabled will have the opportunity to learn age-appropriate social skills.

Children who learn appropriate social skills often have a higher self-esteem and show a greater willingness to interact with their environment as they grow. Opportunities for social interaction not only enhance development in the early years, but also may be important for the future of the young child who is disabled. The ability to interact competently with is a skill that is required throughout life and may affect future educational and vocational opportunities. Assisting young children who are disabled to learn through positive social interaction with nondisabled children may help them acquire skills from which they will benefit throughout their life.

## **Promoting Social Interactions**

Interacting and playing with peers provides many learning opportunities for young children. In integrated preschool settings, nondisabled children and children with disabilities may need to be encouraged to play together. Social interaction between the two groups of children can be encouraged in a number of different ways. Suggestions for ways to use teacher attention and to structure the classroom to promote socially interactive play are discussed below.

Teachers and adults can be very effective in promoting social interaction by encouraging children to play together and by praising them when they do. However, it is important to remember that too much adult attention may interfere with the children's interactions. It is a good idea, therefore, for adults to remove themselves from the play situation once children have begun to play together.

Teachers and other adults also can promote interactions by teaching children specific ways to ask other children to play, to share toys, to take turns, to express affection and to help other children.

Assisting children to control their aggressive behavior encourages the formation of friendships.

Planning small group activities that require cooperation and sharing motivates socially interactive behavior. For example, painting a mural or making soup as a group encourages children to learn to work together.

Being certain that children with disabilities are seated next to nondisabled children makes it easy for the children to interact with and learn from each other.

Allowing the child who is disabled to lead activities, pass out materials, and be praised in front of his or her classmates helps the nondisabled child view the child who is disabled as a competent friend.

Toys such as blocks, dolls, dress-up clothes, trains, and cars promote social interactions much more than do toys such as beads, clay, puzzles and paints.

Providing toys with which the child who is disabled can play competently encourages the children to play together. Limiting the number of toys available and requesting that children play in a small area requires the children to share and engage in the same activity, thereby encouraging social interaction.