

+ Group Activities: One Child At A Time

While planning group activities that meet the needs and interests of individual children is obviously important, it can seem almost unachievable for a diverse group of young children. Truly individualizing is more than viewing each child as a unique person. It means planning and conducting activities which offer opportunities for each child to learn. An individualized group activity provides learning opportunities at various developmental levels and addresses each child's interests. Individualizing is a key aspect of inclusion because it allows young children with disabilities and/or developmental delays opportunities to participate in activities with their peers.

Two steps are crucial to individualizing small group activities—planning and doing. While this may seem like common sense, it takes skill and practice to approach activities with individualizing in mind.

Planning begins with reflection on what you already know about each child's interests, experiences, and abilities to imagine how he or she may participate in a given activity. Observations of children in other daily activities can help you anticipate what each child might need to get involved. As you plan, it may help to ask yourself the following questions:

- ▶ Which materials best meet the needs and interests of each child involved?
- ▶ How can I arrange the materials and equipment to encourage each child's participation?
- ▶ How can the activity be more accessible to each child?
- ▶ What can I do so children can come and go from the activity at their own pace?

If you are planning a painting activity, for example, you may choose two colors of paint because previously several of the children were interested in mixing colors. You may also offer the choice of finger painting as well

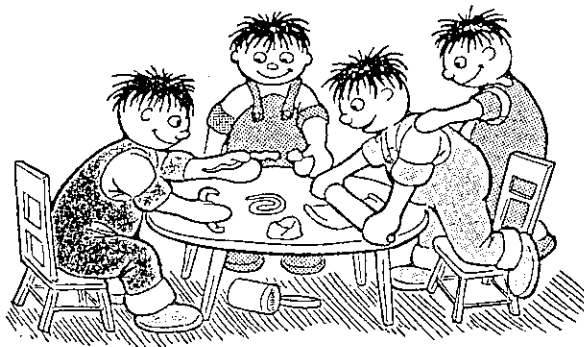
as brush painting or provide adapted paint brushes because one child has difficulty holding a brush. The physical layout for painting will address the child who needs to sit as well as those who can stand at the easel. To provide access to the activity, you may have paint available on a table as well as the easel so children can readily reach it. Finally, you design the activity and the clean up so it is easy for children to finish the activity on their individual time line.

The key to the second step—doing—is to develop a flexible response to children's behavior while they are engaged in the activity and make immediate changes as you observe a need. You may offer another paint color

if children are discovering what happens when red paint is mixed with white paint. Likewise, you may lower the easel so that a child who is tired of standing can sit and paint. These immediate changes are easier when you have access to additional materials, and when you have planned the activity knowing that you want the flexibility to respond

to children's changing interests and needs.

Children thrive in an environment that offers possibilities for individual success in the midst of every experience, and that is the purpose of individualizing. Designing individualized group activities is an art form which is practiced and perfected by experienced teachers who believe that individualizing is the key that allows every child to learn by doing. + SAM



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+ FROM THE SOURCE

Child Care Networks

Many child care providers and local child care organizations are creating networks of providers who meet together regularly to talk about early childhood issues and challenges. Often these networks form because individuals have similar interests: infant/toddler care, preschool-age care, family child care, being a center director, etc. Some networks are made up of providers from various types of programs who happen to live and work in the same neighborhood. Effective networks involve providers in ongoing professional development and support for each other.

Network meetings are ideal for discussing the care and education of children with disabilities or developmental delays. Topics which directly relate to inclusion, such as using special feeding techniques or sign language, making programs wheelchair accessible, or communicating with early intervention and special education teams, can be integrated into ongoing discussions related to honoring diversity, ensuring access to routines, activities, and materials for each child, and developmentally appropriate practice.

A network can be as small as two providers who get together once a month over lunch or big enough to organize monthly workshops with expert facilitators. Whatever size, issues surrounding inclusion can be natural and frequent topics. + KMG

+ MAKING IT WORK

"Strings and Beads"

You can set up stringing beads as an individualized activity by providing different kinds and sizes of "strings" and "beads." By choosing materials that address the interests and needs of children across a variety of age and ability levels, you offer:

- ✓ chances for each child to be successful.
- ✓ challenge for children at a range of developmental levels.
- ✓ opportunities for children to use both small and large motor skills.

To show children how to begin, you may want to start a few "strings" of "beads" and leave them lying around the area. The following suggestions for "strings" and "beads" are grouped from most challenging to least challenging. + SLM

Ideas for "Strings"	Ideas for "Beads"
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ fishing line▶ yarn or string▶ shoe laces▶ leather cord▶ plastic wrapped wire▶ rope with taped ends▶ $\frac{1}{4}$" nylon tubing▶ lengths of hose	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ buttons▶ beads of various sizes▶ macaroni noodles▶ giant manicotti noodles▶ empty toilet paper rolls, cut in half▶ frozen juice or other cans, ends cut out

+ NOTES FROM HOME: Individualizing for Anthony

My child has severe disabilities—no vision, limited hearing, and little voluntary movement. For the past six months, he has gone to a child care program two days a week. Each day, I read the menu and the daily plan posted by the door, and it always looks like the teachers have planned really fun activities. However, I never thought my child would or could participate. I imagined Anthony sitting in his wheelchair a few feet from kids gathered at one of the tables.

Last week, I picked Anthony up early for a doctor's appointment, and I saw children gathered around a table surrounded by pieces of wood, screws, nuts, and bolts. And there sat my child, right in the middle of things, with both hands in a tray of nuts and bolts. His teachers had found a way that Anthony could participate in this activity, and he was loving every minute of it. When someone sees my child in a wheelchair, I know they feel sorry for him; there are so many things that he can't and never will do. But his teachers were able to see beyond the disability and let him be a regular kid. What did the teachers specifically do to help Anthony participate?

- + They noticed that he liked to feel around things on his wheelchair tray so they filled the tray with all sorts of nuts and bolts that could be easily moved around as Anthony placed his arms randomly on the tray.
- + Because his sight and hearing are diminished, they took advantage of his other senses to enhance play. Some of the nuts and bolts were placed in the refrigerator overnight to give Anthony a contrasting sensory experience.
- + They moved Anthony's chair into the middle of the activity so that he and the other children knew that even though he wasn't building wooden structures, his participation was important. +

+ SPOTLIGHT: Missoula Even Start Program

The Missoula Even Start program, called FLOAT (Family Literacy Opportunities and Training), is a family literacy program which provides support and education for families of young children who are struggling with issues of poverty and limited education opportunities. The program provides family-centered education based on four main components: 1) adult education, 2) parenting support, 3) early childhood education, and 4) interactive parent-child activities.

This program began in the summer of 1997, and FLOAT staff members have been setting up the preschool classroom and recruiting families. Even at this point, a commitment to plan for and celebrate a diverse community of families and children is clearly evident in the mission and start up of each part of this project.

❖ The *adult education* component supports family literacy development and includes 18 hours of instruction geared to obtaining a GED, employability skills, and/or English as a second language. Both center and home-based instruction are available, allowing parents to choose an option according to individual needs, preferred learning style, caregiving demands at home, comfort level in group situations, and availability of transportation. Goals are established individually with each family, and parents are responsible for developing and maintaining their own learning portfolio throughout participation in the program. Project staff review portfolios with each family on a weekly basis to review goals and progress as well as to adjust the focus of the adult education classes as family strengths and needs change over time.

❖ *Parenting support* activities and parent education using interactive parenting curricula are provided four hours each week. Their primary goal is that "parents will show increased confidence in their ability to be their child's first teacher..." As parents take the lead in teaching and advocating for their children, individual family beliefs, cultures, and dreams are woven into the education plans for their children.

❖ *Early childhood education* is provided at the neighborhood elementary school in a full-day preschool program for children between the ages of three and five. The preschool is designed for children with a

wide range of developmental strengths and needs, represented a rainbow of cultures and language backgrounds, and have interests that range from A to Z.

Whole language literacy methods and a thematic approach were chosen to involve children in meaningful learning activities based on their individual interests, strengths, and needs. The classroom environment includes tables and shelving with a range of heights, table top easels that can readily become wheelchair accessible, and calming colors to avoid overwhelming or distracting sensitive children. Toys and play materials were carefully selected to insure that there was "something for everyone." To create a learning environment that could meet individual needs, each toy and play material was analyzed:

- ▶ Can it be used for different kinds of play?
- ▶ Does it incorporate different senses?
- ▶ Does this item help ensure that the classroom provides a range of toys and play materials from simple to more complex?
- ▶ Can it be adapted for use by children with different interests and abilities?

❖ Parents and Children Together (PACT) provides four hours each week of *interactive parent-child activities*. During these activities, parents and children learn together to further develop the parent's role as the most important teacher of their children.

These four components serve as the foundation of the FLOAT project and its goal to meet the unique needs of families enrolled in the program. This ability to recognize and work toward

meeting the individual needs of parents and children is further supported by collaboration with other agencies including the Missoula County Public Schools, Adult Basic Education, Title 1 programs, Family Basics, Child Care Resources, and Missoula Head Start. For more information, call one of the following FLOAT staff members at (406) 542-4020. + SHW

Nancy Canning, Coordinator and Adult Educator
Kelly Kopitzke, Preschool Educator
Shelley Barrett-Catton, Family Literacy Advocate

FLOAT PROGRAM

+ What do I do when . . . ?

QUESTION: *I don't have a degree in special education. I understand it is important to individualize—and I want to—but I'm not sure how to design an activity to include a child with a disability.*

ANSWER: First of all, you are not designing a different activity, you are simply making modifications that will allow each child to participate in a meaningful way. But there are some things that will help you decide what you can do to meet the needs of an individual child. First, ask people who know the child well to get an idea of what kinds of play experiences have been successful. This is especially useful if the child is new to your program.

Most importantly, take your cues from the child. Spend time observing the child's behavior to see what he or she enjoys, what kinds of skills are used easily, and what types of toys seem to be most interesting. If you observe the child busily involved in a play activity in the block area, for example, figure out what makes that activity so successful and try to recreate that strategy in a group activity. Or, if during mealtime you notice that the child loves to experience the squishy textures of food, try to embed the same sensory experience in a group activity. In most cases, children's behavior will give you the information you need in planning the activity, and by watching each child's response to what you have planned, you will know if something needs to change.

Never assume that a child cannot participate. Adopt a mind set that says every child can be involved and then find ways that the activity can be modified to reflect each child's developmental abilities and interests.

Be willing to engage in trial and error. You may not know what will engage a child, but you can try a few different

ideas and see if any of them work. Do not consider the activity a failure because one or more of the children do not participate. Just keep making minor changes in materials, physical layout, or access to play. + SAM

Child Care plus+ staff are available to answer questions, brainstorm, problem-solve, and provide resources and information regarding individualizing for young children.

Call 1-800-235-4122

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

Developed at the University of Kansas, *Inclusive Child Care for Infants and Toddlers: Meeting Individual and Special Needs* by Marion O'Brien (1997) offers comprehensive and practical guidelines for providing responsive and loving care for infants and toddlers. This resource tackles the complex and difficult issues surrounding implementation of infant/toddler care and early intervention in inclusive settings. Its 376 pages include a ready-to-use Quality Check, feed/play schedule, and parent report forms. Available from Paul H. Brookes, PO Box 10624, Baltimore, MD 21285-0624 or call 1-800-638-3775.

CHILD CARE plus+ is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers and administrators.
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