

STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATION IN A REGULAR CLASSROOM SETTING

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Daily Routine

The child's schedule at school should be basically the same as the other children's. Have the child follow the same routine as the other students with a few exceptions. A trip outdoors or to the library is suggested when not participating with other children in his/her classroom. A “snack time”, once in the morning and once in the afternoon, before recess or whenever appropriate is suggested. This allows a quiet time in the child's day where there is little stimulation and the child can listen to his/her favorite music. If there is a quiet room or space available in the school, a table and chairs along with a tape recorder and the child's favorite books can be set up. This room or space can be used if the affected child is having difficulty sitting in the classroom and allows the child and worker to stay until things are calmer. When the child is ready, he/she can then return to the classroom and try again.

Encourage the child to follow routines and programming as much as possible even when he/she is restless and anxious. Sometimes they will only participate for a minute or two and then it may become necessary to offer him/her other options. For example, during story time the child will join the other children on the carpet (for a maximum of one minute). Then, if the child becomes restless, he/she may choose to listen from his/her desk or take a little break before trying again.

When a child participates in an activity for a long period of time (5 to 10 minutes or more) and “out of classroom” break is recommended. A walk around the school or a visit to the library before going back to the classroom to continue with the program is most helpful. The child can work with a friend, giving them an opportunity to socialize.

The child should take “in classroom” breaks. A designated activity table can be set up with, for example, the child's favorite books, photo album, busy maze, puzzles and a tap recorder. The child can use this for a 1 – 5 minute break before returning to the activity he/she was working on.

When working on an activity with the child and he/she starts to throw materials, clear his/her desk and have the child sit quietly at his desk. Count to 10 slowly and quietly and once the child is calm, resume the tasks. Always state clearly to the child what the expectations are (i.e. coloring with 3 crayons) and vary the expectations (i.e. only 1 crayon) depending on how the child is feeling or his/her level of restlessness.

Begin a work session with a preferred activity

Beginning a work session with a preferred activity will help to ease the child into working on a non-preferred assigned activity. If the child loves books, begin with a favorite story. Try to give the child a choice between stories that are related to the subject or activity you are working on for example: number books for math. Once the child has completed his/her assigned activity, then end with one of his/her favorite activities of his/her choice. Try to work on the activity or book at the same time every day. For example, begin a book by looking at the pictures only. Then, read 2-3 pages, then add 1-2 pages each day or, work on an activity for 1 minute to start, then increase the time as the child becomes more familiar.

Always give the child clear expectations (3 pages or 3 pieces of the puzzle) and repeatedly label and **reinforce** preferred behaviors i.e. “Mary/Johnny, great job reading, only one more page”. This strategy is preferable to focusing on any **task avoidance** behaviors. Anything new takes a lot of repetition and time before the child feels comfortable. On average, it usually takes about four weeks and a lot of patience. These particular strategies are useful for any new games, swimming or gym equipment as well.

Educational Program

The child's educational program can be modified to match his/her individual needs and level of learning. Familiar activities such as the ones he/she enjoys can be integrated wherever they are appropriate as teaching tools. For example, math activities include: Duplo, blocks, puzzles, beads and number books. Phonics activities include: Books related to themes, a scrap book, pencil crayons, stamps and stamp pad, glue stick and magazine pictures or actual photos, stickers and cause and effect toys.

Group Activities

During group activities such as story time or sharing, the child can have his favorite book or photos that he/she can flip through as he/she listens. What the teacher or student is talking about should be repeatedly reiterated. Help the child to remain focused by labeling and positively reinforcing preferred behaviors, i.e. "good listening," "great job sitting," "look at the picture," "hands on your lap." If the child becomes restless, have him/her softly sing a song or slowly count to 10. If the child does not settle, take a break, then come back and try again.

Transitions

Transitions from one activity to another or moving from one room to another can be difficult for the affected child. Some strategies that can be put into place to help alleviate some of the child's anxiety over these situations are: Have the child arrive at school after the children have entered and settled into the classroom, thus limiting the amount of commotion in the hallways. Have the child come in from recess and leave at the end of the day before the other children. This calmer atmosphere is much more positive for the child.

In between moving from carpet to working at his/her desk, a walk around the school may be in order. Occasionally, have the child invite a friend along. This gives the child an opportunity to spend time with his peers. When waiting for an activity to begin or for everyone in the class to settle, have the child read a book, look at picture or sing songs with a friend. If the child is restless, leave, and invite a friend along.

As well, try to prepare the child about 5 minutes ahead of time so that he is aware that one activity is ending and a new one will be beginning. Other strategies include a bell, whistle, turning out lights, a song, sign language and picture symbols. Picture symbols are not always successful for transitions. However they can be useful for the child to communicate his/her needs.

Picture Symbols

Picture symbols are a good tool to use for communication. Depending on the child, picture symbols can be introduced one of two at a time, depending on what the child is comfortable with. Once the child is consistently using the symbols presented, be it one, two or even three then move on to the next set of symbols. It can be a long process, but in the end, well worth the effort. Also, taping the picture symbols to the desk, rather than on a card or in a photo album because the child tends to just play with them.

Socialization

Some MPS children tend to be aggressive in their behavior toward other children, particularly those affected with Sanfilippo syndrome. They will hit, pull hair or push when anxious, upset, excited or clumsily touching. There are several strategies that can be put into place to help minimize physical contact and teach the child appropriate touching. **Physically blocking** a hit with an arm or body, coupled with the words "nice touching" can help. Use body blocking to prevent the child from entering into other classrooms, pulling at objects or from entering dangerous areas.

Using **role model** and **hand-over-hand** to teach appropriate touching is another effective strategy. Use the words “nice touching” to **label** appropriate touching and **positive reinforcement** whenever the child is touching appropriately. Try to **avoid labeling negative behaviors** and give the child other options to his negative behaviors. For example, “hands in your lap”, “touch hands, not hair”, “hands down”, “leave space”, “walk away” “book on shelf not on floor”.

When a child has been hit, have the child sit quietly and give attention to the other child. Make sure he/she is okay, then have the child touch the other child appropriately while saying, “nice touching”. Encourage the child to touch the other children on their hands and to use a handshake to greet the other children.

The teacher, behavioral consultant and child care worker should sit with the children and talk to them about MPS and Sanfilippo Syndrome in particular, and about strategies to assist them with communication and socialization with the affected child. This will give the children a better understanding of the child and his behaviors and help to relieve some of their anxieties. Encourage the children to verbally remind the child to use nice touching. The children should leave a space (about an arms length) around the child so that he/she does not feel crowded. It is recommended they be instructed to approach him/her from the front so as not to startle the child. Teach them to put their hands out as a greeting. Should the child get a hold on another child’s arm or hair, teach them to put their hand on top of his/hers and tell him/her to “stop” or “let go”. Over time, the child’s social skills will improve and most of his/her experiences with children will be positive.

Conclusion

The above strategies should help children affected with MPS to successfully integrate into the classroom at school. There will be days when the strategies seem ineffective. Those may be the times when the child is not feeling well, is going through a phase, routine changes or other environmental factors.

The only way to know whether a certain strategy is effective is through consistency and repetition. Sometimes it takes weeks or even months before there are positive results. Perseverance does pay off. It is also important to continue modifying to accommodate a child’s needs and to be flexible. It is important for child care workers, teachers, behavioral consultants and occupational and language therapists to assist one another in building and developing these strategies by sharing their own knowledge and experiences.