



INCLUSION VS. SELF-CONTAINED EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

The idea is not new. Including children with special needs in classrooms to learn alongside typical learners promotes the sense of a welcoming environment for all, where differences are valued and learning opportunities are accessible to all, in every classroom. Depending on where you live, the concept may be referred to as “mainstreaming,” “integration,” as well as “inclusion.”

Long before the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), children with disabilities did not attend public school. Those who did go to school were taught in self-contained classroom settings. It was thought that a slowed down, bare bones curriculum would allow the children to learn the basic educational skills more intensively. In this separate setting, the children could learn from their own curriculum, in their own space, and often even in a separate school.

However his type of “special” education is sometimes felt to be inadequate and inferior, as well as separate and not necessarily equal to the regular education programs in the other regular classrooms. Current federal law (IDEA) mandates that all children receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) –and it is up to the each child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) team to determine what constitutes FAPE and LRE for that particular child.

The rationale for inclusive education for students on the autism spectrum is as follows:

- Children on the autism spectrum have the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment.
- Children on the autism spectrum deserve the same learning opportunities as typical learners.
- Children on the autism spectrum can learn appropriate (social) behavior

from the typically developing peer models and classmates.

- Children on the autism spectrum or other special needs spend their entire lives in a typically developing world and learning beside their neighbors and friends is a more natural environment.
- Children without special needs need to understand how to learn and eventually work alongside those with different abilities and areas of difficulty, who will live with them in their community. Inclusion provides this opportunity as well.

Yes - These statements are all true, but additionally we know that exposure alone is not enough to teach children with special needs. Learning opportunities need to be planned for, lessons need to be structured, and the learning style and needs of the learner must be considered. Accommodations for learning styles, academic needs, and sensory and social issues must all be addressed.

Clearly, inclusion does not mean putting students with disabilities in regular classrooms and hoping for the best. Students who are eligible for special education are entitled to any accommodations that are necessary to help them access the educational curriculum and meet the goals in their IEPs, and teachers of inclusion classrooms are entitled to any training and other supports that they require to support all students in their classrooms.

Is full inclusion the correct course of action at this point in time for your child?

Full inclusion means that your child will be educated with typical peers 100% of the school day. Whether or not full inclusion will work is highly dependent on your child and the supports provided in the inclusive classroom.

The opposite of full inclusion is spending the entire day in a self-contained classroom. Self-contained classrooms may cater to a particular disability, for example, Autism Support Classrooms.

Yet, there are intermediate placements, somewhere between full inclusion and full-time in a self-contained classroom. Students may split their time between inclusive and special education classrooms. This is known as part-time special education. It is frequently described in percent of the day. For example, the child might spend 40% of the time at school in special education and 60% in regular education. These percentages are extremely variable and can and should change over time, based on measurable success as described in the student's IEP.

Examples of part-time special education placements include:

- *Pull out/push in model* - “Pull out” is where children are pulled out of their inclusive classroom to receive more concentrated instruction in the program areas where they need support or extra attention, such as for social skills, occupational therapy, or speech-language therapy. One problem with this model is that students miss information and instruction when they are not in the classroom. Also, the “pulled out” student may feel singled out or embarrassed for requiring special instruction, and he or she may have difficulty transitioning from one classroom to another. “Push in” is a model where the therapist brings therapy into the child’s classroom. This has the advantage of not removing the child from the class, allowing for individualized instruction within the general education classroom. It removes the mystery of where the student goes and what the student does, and it allows all the students, regular educators, and special educators to witness the lessons together. A hybrid of both types of programs can be written into the child’s IEP. For example, push in for help with reading, using some classmates to model and motivate interest in the materials, and pull out during lunch or recess, two unstructured times of the day that may be difficult for students on the autism spectrum. During the pull out, the student can be taught appropriate social skills and how to play common recess games, which will allow the student to be included at lunch and recess once the skills are developed.
- *Resource room* - A resource room provides an opportunity for intensive instruction outside of the classroom. Students go to the resource room for a part of the day to work on particular subjects with a special education teacher. Only a few students are in the resource room at a time, which allows for more individualized and/or small group instruction. Students with learning disabilities often benefit from this type of intensive teaching. Core academic subjects, such as reading or math, can be addressed in the resource room. The goal is to help the student in an area of need that may be able to carry over and benefit the student when he or she is in an inclusive classroom. For example, if the child learns to read with better comprehension, this will benefit many other subjects, including math, social studies, and science, which may be taken in an inclusive classroom.
- *Included for Specials* - Specials include Physical Education, Art, Music,

Computers, and sometimes basic foreign language. Many students who attend a self-contained classroom or resource room participate with their peers in specials. Depending on the organization of the class, this may or may not be an appropriate chance for the child to take classes with other peers. Whether or not inclusive specials are appropriate will be highly dependent on the individual student. Consider, for example, whether it is better for the student to attend an adaptive physical education class or join in the regular class and learn and play games alongside all other students.

An IEP Team should weigh many factors when deciding on the least restrictive placement for a student on the autism spectrum. Some questions to consider are:

In the inclusive classroom:

- Is the learning environment able to support the child's academic needs?
- Can the child sustain attention among the 25 - 30 students in the classroom?
- How will intention to model and learn social skills from peer models be implemented in this setting?
- Will there be enough/multiple opportunities for the child to practice his/her new skills?
- How will learning be measured and how will data be collected?

In the self-contained classroom:

- Is the learning environment able to support the child's academic needs? Is the child being appropriately challenged academically?
- Is the teacher able to address the varied individual needs of all the students in the classroom?
- Is there ample opportunity for the student to practice and "try out" the new skills?

Parents and caretakers know their children best. Because each child on the autism spectrum can be so different from another, your ideas and knowledge of your child are critical to designing an educational program that tailors learning and the educational placement to your child's strengths and needs. While working with educational professionals may seem intimidating, you have a lot to contribute, and the reward of your involvement is seeing the progress your child will make academically, behaviorally, and socially throughout the school years.

Related Articles:

- [Placement Options for School-Age Students Receiving Special Education Services](#)
- [Where Will My Child Receive School-Age Special Education Services?](#)
- [The Big I-D-E-A](#)
- [IEP Basics for Families of School-Age Students](#)
- [Accommodations and Supports for School-Age Students with ASD](#)
- [Overview of Professionals in the School-Age Special Education System](#)

Additional Resources:

- [PATTAN: Inclusive Practices](#)
- [Wrightslaw: Least Restrictive Environment and FAPE](#)
- Sheila Wagner, M.Ed. has authored a series of readable, practical books about Inclusive Programming for children diagnosed with ASD in Elementary, Middle, and High School

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