

ORDINARY TOOLS CAN YIELD EXTRAORDINARY RESULTS

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) states: "A child with a disability is not removed from education in age-appropriate regular classes solely because of needed modifications in the general curriculum." For example, a 10-year-old student should not be removed (or denied placement) in a fifth grade classroom just because he isn't reading at grade level—the class reading material (in this case) should be modified so he can "be involved and make progress" (per IDEA) in the fifth grade curriculum. This is one in a series of articles about curriculum modifications.

The hallmarks of successful curriculum modifications include thinking creatively, identifying how a student learns best, and trying new strategies—as many as it takes! And, as detailed in other articles, the use of computers, books on tape, videos, calculators, handheld electronic games, and other hi-tech devices are often great solutions. But there are ordinary and low-tech tools that can lead to extraordinary results for students who need curriculum modifications.

Consider the common deck of cards. It's a veritable storehouse of learning opportunities! Cards can be used to help a child: (1) count (by counting the cards or by pointing to and counting the shapes on a card); (2) learn bigger and smaller (two players each have half the deck, each puts a card down at the same time, and whoever has the bigger number wins those two cards); (3) learn addition and subtraction games (find a 2-card and a 3-card, now find a card that has the total of the two cards); (4) learn about sorting (by number, shape, or color); and more! Take a deck of cards and play with it yourself, and think about the many different ways it might help a child in your life. (And consider dice and dominos, too!)

A learner with low-vision or one who has difficulty handling traditional cards might need oversize cards. Card holders may also be helpful. Oversized dice and dominoes are also available. These items can

be found at companies that sell educational and/or low-vision products.

Next, consider the possibilities of your telephone book, both the white and yellow pages. (If you live in a metro area and the book is way too big for a younger child to handle, acquire one from a smaller town near your area.) The index of the yellow pages can help children learn about alphabetizing. Math games can be played with telephone numbers. Social studies and self-help skills can be learned via the yellow pages. What types of businesses do what? Why do we need those products/services? What types of jobs do these businesses represent? Would I like a job like that? Where do I go to get help with [whatever]?

Students can research businesses, interview the business manager via a phone call, and then write an essay about the business. The government pages in a phone book can help children understand the difference between local, county, state, and federal bureaucracies. What else is in your phone book that might help a child learn?

The daily newspaper is an excellent all-around tool. Emerging readers can improve their skills by reading the headlines; more proficient readers can study the stories. The ads in newspapers are great for learning about numbers and math. Students who are not yet readers can cut out news or advertising photos

and make a rebus story. (Magazines and catalogs can be used for this purpose, too.)

What's so great about using these common, ordinary tools is their universal helpfulness to *all* students in the classroom. Consider the use of a real map (as opposed to one in a textbook). A teacher can meet the needs of *all* her students with this one tool, by providing a list of activities that cover a wide spectrum of students' learning abilities and styles. With a map, learning geography, math, and reading are all possibilities.

A beginning reader can be helped to find the written names of the towns he's familiar with (those he's heard about all his life—like where grandma lives). Another student might perform math, by adding the mileage from home to Podunk, then figuring out how long it will take to get there. Learning to identify cities, mountains, rivers, lakes, and other landmarks would be a helpful geography and real-life lesson for other students.

How many times do students crack open a dictionary, thesaurus, or encyclopedia (including computer versions)? Yes, these are great resources for finding the definition of a word, finding an alternate word, or doing research on a particular subject. But how could these be used for wider learning activities? Combine math and reading by asking a student to find so many words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, or whatever) in a dictionary or thesaurus that start with this-letter-or-that, and so forth.

What if a student was allowed to simply browse a computer encyclopedia in order to find three topics/entries/photos that interest her? This might be the opening opportunity to learn what motivates a student, and this knowledge can, in turn, open the door for reaching the student—based on her interests.

Some students have great difficulty with learning simply because the traditional school subjects just don't seem meaningful to them. "Tim" was still struggling with reading, especially with the more

difficult books in middle school. Tim's current love was motorcycles—he was said to be "obsessed" with motorcycles. When he was encouraged to study motorcycle articles in encyclopedias, magazines, books, and other sources—and write reports on this subject—his overall reading and writing skills improved, which enabled him to be more successful in the "boring" (to him) subjects in sixth-grade.

Using ordinary tools to teach all students is helpful in creating inclusive classrooms. In the map example, the curriculum has essentially been modified for *all* the students in the class. All are simultaneously engaged in the same topic, and since each is working on what he/she needs to learn, there's no reason for a child who receives special ed services to be pulled out for one-on-one. During such activities, students can work individually or in small, diverse groups. Within these diverse groups, students work on their own individual level and on their own "project," but they're in a position to help one another and learn from one another.

Using ordinary tools also promotes successful learning at home: most families already have these same tools in their homes. And since these activities are often much more enjoyable than traditional "book learning," what we think of as homework can actually become a fun, family activity that can promote and ensure a student's success.

Look around your home, classroom, or office, and keep your eyes peeled when shopping, for ordinary tools that can lead to extraordinary results! Practice seeing ordinary items with new eyes. Put your thinking cap on—brainstorm ideas with others, including children!

There is not "one way" to teach anything or learn anything. The "best way" is whatever works for the *learner*. All kids—and adults—are natural-born learners. Teachers and parents-as-teachers can embark on a journey of creativity and discovery to ensure all children learn.