

Summer Vacation: Time for Fun and Time to Plan

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

Ahhhh, summertime—vacations, swimming, camping, family time, lazy days, and more. Make this your family’s best summer ever, and at the same time, lay the groundwork for a successful school year when September rolls around.

If your child is included in typical, inclusive community activities this summer, not only will she have a wonderful time and make new friends, she’ll also demonstrate that she can be included in “regular” activities. This can be a very important piece of “evidence” at her next IEP meeting! And while your child is having fun, you’ll be creating new friends who can be valuable allies in your efforts to ensure your child is in an inclusive classroom at school!

You may be thinking, “My child can’t participate in ‘normal’ activities—there’s no way all this will work for us.” But your child *can* be successful in inclusive community activities! Read on—

Begin by checking out all the organized activities in your community that your child might enjoy, such as YMCA or Park and Recreation classes/sports; library/museum classes; and Scouts, Campfire, 4-H, etc. Look for activities that will enable your child to be with similar-aged children without disabilities who may be classmates during the next school year.

In addition, put your thinking cap on and consider what activities *you could orchestrate*: a neighborhood play date every Friday, a field trip to community activities (zoo, park, etc.) once a week, or anything else that will enable you and your child to make new connections in inclusive settings.

As you check out organized activities, learn as much as you can about them ahead of time: ask other parents; observe the activity, if that’s possible; and/or call the sponsor and ask lots of questions (but don’t mention your child’s disability at this point).

While you’re doing this “reconnaissance,” think about what your child will need to be successful:

physical or environmental modifications, assistive technology devices, support from other children or an adult leader, and so forth. Your child doesn’t need a one-to-one aide; that person will get in the way of your child making real connections. Instead, teach your child how to ask for help from whoever is closest—another child or the adult leader or volunteer. (My articles, “Ask and You Shall Receive” and “When Less is More” might be helpful.)

Next, talk to your child and enthusiastically share what you’ve learned! Describe the activities, share your ideas about supports and modifications he might need, get his input, listen to his concerns, and let him make the final decision about which activities he might want to try. It might even be possible for your child and another family member to participate together. When my then nine-year-old son, Benjamin, took karate classes, his dad took the class with him! This class was for all ages, and my husband knew to “back off” and allow Benjamin to make friends, instead of sticking to him like glue!

Next, enroll your child and don’t say one word about his disability at that time. At enrollment time, try to learn more about the activity, the other participants, and so forth, and then modify, as necessary, your ideas about supports, accommodations, etc. A few days before the activity starts, call the leader and, in a positive, helpful manner, describe what your child will need and describe how it can be done. You do *not* need to disclose your child’s diagnosis (that can be scary for some people to hear)—you only need to share *what your child needs!*

Say something like, “Since my son uses a wheelchair, he’ll need some assistance with...” or “My daughter will do best if she has a couple of peer helpers.” Don’t ask permission for these things and don’t whine or get angry! Simply state what your child will need and describe *how* to provide it. If you tell people what your child needs, *without* describing how

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to provide the help, they may not know what to do and failure is likely. And, of course, do all this with excitement, good manners, kindness, and patience, developing allies in the process! If the leader of the activity demonstrates any concerns or resistance, stay positive and ask, “What will it take for you to feel more comfortable,” and assure the person that this will be a successful adventure if the lines of communication remain open!

You may not *think* you know what supports and accommodations your child needs, but you really do—you’re an expert on your child! Sit and ponder, talk with others, brainstorm with family members, and ask your child. Your first ideas may not be perfect, and that’s OK. After the activity begins, you and your child, along with the activity leader, might need to fine-tune things. And this is great—everyone can learn together!

Now, onto the next phase: developing allies! Contrary to popular opinion, the best people to assist parents in achieving school inclusion are *not* other parents of kids with disabilities or professional advocates. Bringing “big guns” to the IEP meeting can inflame an already heated situation. The best helpers are those who do *not* bring “special ed expertise” to the meeting—like the new friends you’ll be making over the summer—who can bring common sense and cool heads to IEP meetings.

Once your child is involved in inclusive summer activities, your job is to become friends with the other kids’ parents, the activity leaders, and/or volunteers. Reach out to them: invite their children over to play, offer to carpool, organize a pot luck supper after a big game, volunteer to help with the activity (but *not* as your child’s aide—help all the kids), or do whatever it takes to create and maintain new friendships.

As the relationships develop, brag about your child’s gifts (has a great memory, is happy, is trying really hard to talk, collects baseball cards, etc.). After you’ve detailed positive characteristics—*and only*

then—share more about your child’s needs related to his disability, and do this in a way that generates a positive, respectful, and accurate portrayal of your child. Say, “My son needs behavior supports,” instead of, “He has behavior problems.” Say, “My daughter uses a communication device,” instead of, “My daughter is non-verbal.”

As you get to know these new friends, tell them you’d like your child to be included in a regular ed class in the neighborhood school with supports and accommodations. At the same time, *do not* tell all your war stories about educators you don’t like! You want to build bridges and create allies, and slamming others (even if they deserve it) doesn’t help! You can, however, share general information about how schools have traditionally undereducated students with disabilities in segregated classrooms, and how harmful this practice has been (like contributing to the 75 percent unemployment rate of people with disabilities). Your new friends will see that since your child is experiencing success in typical summer activities with supports and/or accommodations, he could also be successful in a regular ed classroom with curriculum modifications, supports, and so forth.

As the lazy days of summer pass and your friendships deepen, ask your new allies for help with school inclusion. They may be able to recommend general ed teachers, get you connected to educators who can become allies, and/or use their influence on behalf of your child! They can attend the IEP meeting and provide “testimony” about your child’s inclusion in summer activities.

Resolve to enjoy every precious moment of summer vacation! Have fun as you get your child involved in inclusive community activities, make new friends, and begin a journey that can lead to inclusive education! With the appropriate supports, accommodations, assistive technology, and/or modifications, *every child can be successful* in inclusive settings—in the community and at school! Success in these settings will put your child on a path to success as an adult—in a job, at college, and for the rest of his life!