

NASET's HOW TO Series

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How To Work with the Student with Intellectual Disabilities in the Classroom

What is intellectual and developmental disability?

A student can be defined as having an intellectual and developmental disability if he/she exhibits certain learning, social and behavior patterns to a marked extent and over a prolonged period of time. **Such patterns may include:**

- A consistently sub-average intellectual level
- Impaired adaptive functioning in such areas as social skills, communication and daily living skills
- Consistently slow rate of learning and as a result their level of development resembles that of a younger child
- Delays in most areas of development

Some common characteristics of a mild mental disability that may be observed by the teacher over a period of time include:

- academic underachievement
- difficulty with abstract concepts
- difficulty generalizing learned concepts to new situations
- social isolation or withdrawal
- poor social relationships
- anxious and worried, excessive fears and phobias
- easily frustrated even when confronted with a simple task
- resistance to change
- short attention span

However, students who are mildly mentally disabled learn in the same way as normal students. However, adaptations and a variety of techniques need to be utilized. Consequently, certain behaviors should be targeted as priorities when dealing with mentally disabled children in the classroom. These target areas include:

- Functional academics
- General Work Habits
- Career awareness

While many or all of these areas may be exhibited by the mentally disabled child, the teacher should try to focus on one area at a time. Patience, fairness, nurturance, humor and a sense of conviction in maintaining boundaries are all aspects required by the teacher in these situations.

Helping the Child Attain Functional Academics

General

- Design practice activities in any basic skill that may relate to the child's daily life problems.
- Provide materials that are commensurate with the child's skill levels.
- Provide activities that will reinforce independent work. If the activity is too hard the child may become too dependent on teacher supervision.

Reading

- Provide activities that focus on reading for information and leisure
- Provide activities that require the child to become more aware of his/her surrounding environment. Having the child list the names of all food stores in the community, or all hospitals and so on will increase his/her familiarity with the surrounding environment.
- Have the child collect food labels and compare the differences
- Allow them look up the names of the children's families in the phone book. Use the smaller local guide for this activity.
- Develop activities that will allow them to become familiar with menus, bus and train schedules, movie and television timetables, or job advertisements.

Handwriting/Spelling

- Have the child make a list of things to do for the day.
- Have the child run a messenger service in the classroom so that he/she can write the messages and deliver them from one student to another.
- Provide activities for older children that incorporate daily writing skills necessary for independency such as social security forms, drivers license application, bank account applications and so on.

Math

- Have the child buy something at the school store
- Have the child make up a budget on how they plan to use his/her allowance
- Encourage the child to cook in school or at home so that they can become more familiar with measurements
- Have the child record the daily temperature
- Involve the child in measuring the height of classmates
- Have older children apply for a loan or credit card
- Show the child how to use a daily planning book
- Provide activities that teach the child how to comparison shop
- Provide the child with a make believe amount of money and a toy catalog and have them purchase items and fill out the forms.

Helping the Child Improve General Work Habits

This particular area is composed of many skill areas that are necessary to allow the child success in the regular classroom. They include:

Work Completion

- Make reward activities contingent upon successful completion of work.
- Have the child maintain a performance chart on the number of tasks completed each day
- Evaluate the length and level of an assignment to make sure it is within the ability level of the child
- Give shorter but more frequent assignments
- Build a foundation of success by providing a series of successful assignments. In this way the child can gain a sense of confidence.

Attendance and Punctuality

- Communicate to the child the importance of being on time to class
- Let the child know your expectations in clear terms concerning attendance and punctuality
- Have the child maintain a record of attendance and on time behavior,
- Develop a make believe time clock that the child has to punch in on when they enter the classroom
- encourage punctuality by scheduling a favorite activity in the morning
- Have the child sign a contract establishing the consequences and rewards of on time behavior.

Working with Others

- Provide the child with small group activities that are geared to his ability levels
- Utilize peer tutors for the child so that relationships can be established
- Have the child participate in many group activities that require sorting, pasting, addressing, folding simple assembly and so on.
- Provide the child with some simple job that requires the other students to go to him/her. For example, place him/her in charge of attendance and have him/her check off the children when they report in.
- Help the child start a hobby and then start a hobby club involving other students
- Have the child be part of a team that takes care of the class pets or some other class activity. Calling it a team will make the child feel more connected.
- Speak with the school psychologist and see if he/she can run a group in your classroom.

Helping the Child with Career Awareness

Career awareness is a skill that can be part of the classroom curriculum in many ways. Many of the skills mentioned above will enhance the child's career skills which should focus on transitioning to adulthood.