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Abstract

The Canadian author, Sarah Gray, is a mother of a child who has a disability. Gray recently attended an inservice for school staff to present a talk on the stresses parents face when fighting for inclusive schooling ("integration" here means "inclusive"). This paper is a portion of the presentation where Gray lists examples of stresses that have affected her, and other parents, such as teacher's negative attitudes, the need for a close liaison between parents and teachers, and the strong need for continuity. **Keyword: Inclusion**

PARENTAL STRESSES AND INTEGRATION

Sarah Gray is an IA-A mom who recently attended an inservice for staff of the Edmonton Public School Board at which she presented a talk on the stresses parents face when having to integrate their child into a regular class. The following is a portion of that presentation:

...wasn't I supposed to 'prove' that my daughter would 'belong'. Isn't that how parents of special needs kids do the extra work? I thought so. Actually as Lindsey's mom I do believe that she needs assurance that she belongs - even more so than any others. She needs the 'normalness' of belonging because she is in a predicament her whole life of facing rejection just because of her disabilities, for being 'special needs' or a 'challenged child'.

To address the original topic, now - I feel that stresses parents face in having their handicapped child's needs met are stresses that no parent should have to face. Examples of stresses given are an accumulation of information from many parents, as well as from me.

1. It is frustrating to hear from professionals NO! It won't work. WE CAN'T DO IT!

It is unjustified to give responses such as this to parents without trying every possible means to make a program work before saying NO.

2. Parents should not have to struggle year after year, with the process of having their child integrated with age appropriate peers. There should be continuity in the grade level from year to year. The administration should have a set method for notifying parents of the changes the school is ready to make on behalf of students served, rather than parents doing 'ground work' each year, fighting for placements in community schools.

It is exhausting as a parent to fight for placement, fight for programs, fight for supervision time, regular classroom time, as well as keep up with individual changes

that occur within the classroom such as: attending meetings, visitations, volunteering etc. The needs of the child must be within the resources available to the school or already part of the school as parents see how stressful it is for teachers to deal with integration of special needs children. There should be recognition of this, somehow, through Central Office. More assistance, other measures to increase support need to be looked at. Parents realise this.

A basic philosophy in viewing a 'special kid' as valuable and important should be a key point emphasised throughout the system. Parents want their child to be accepted. They fear their child will be rejected, hope that he will be accepted, and concentrate on emphasising strengths through the gains the child makes in the integrated setting.

3. Parents need to know that they are able to follow their child's progress in an integrated setting in an open, unrestricted manner. There is a definite need, expressed by parents, to have much closer contact between parents and teachers on a regular basis, aside from 'reporting periods'.

This kind of contact can be more easily maintained in an integrated community school by allowing daily informal contact by parents bringing in their child. (Editor's comment: community school meaning home community where the family resides. This expression is often misused by school boards to refer to any school which is within the city limits, even if it is at the other end of town. When we refer to community schools when talking about integration we mean the school in the same neighbourhood as the family resides in, as the child's other brothers and sisters attend, and the kids next door attend).

4. Parents face many hurdles in their attempts to integrate their handicapped child and slight gains, small leaps, minuscule breakthroughs become shining lights in their child's progress. Strong communication between school and home, teacher and parent is a necessity.

5. Parents worry about special arrangements and how the needs of their child are handled within the school. If, for example, a teaching assistant is ill and must leave the school, how will the school deal with the situation in finding a substitute replacement to carry on with the integrated child and his program for the remainder of the day? It shouldn't be the parent's problem. After all, if the teacher got sick would all the 'regular' children have to go home? This puts tremendous stress on the parent because their child is disabled. No regular parent has to face this situation. (Editor's comment: The support staff, which includes classroom aides, recently were on strike in Calgary. The handicapped students had to remain at home but the non-handicapped students did not have to miss any classes. In Edmonton, Joan Cowling, Chairman of the Edmonton Public Board, extended an invitation to parents of 'regular' students in the separate board that their children could attend public schools if the Catholic Board teachers went on strike but this invitation was not extended to parents with children who were handicapped.)

6. There is a strong need for continuity of assistants who work with integrated children. Parents need to feel confident that their child's program is understood throughout all areas of the school and that their child will have one constant person to assist in carrying out programs. In the early grades it is essential for normal children to have one constant person. How much more so is it necessary for a special needs child who is far less mature.

7. Not enough recognition is given for the strong role assistants play and should be rewarded for. They play an integral part in creating a strong bond between the parent and school, the child and the classroom. Parents need to know the assistant is part of

a team effort in supplying or sharing information on their child's program. It would be of tremendous help to parents to have it easily made available. Parents need to know that the knowledge they have of their own child is important and that they are given credit for formulating goals for their child. Parents don't want to hear that it hasn't been done (precedent) and it can't be done (curriculum).

8.I.E.P's must be useful educational tools, not stumbling blocks. Parents should be updated regularly on the progress the child makes in short term and long term goals.

9. The curriculum goals should be 'normalised', the same format to all schools... They need to know that staff working with their child in any capacity support integration and are willing to advance their child's progress, that it will not be restricted or impeded.

10. Lastly, it is necessary to know and understand the strategies of integration early in the child's life... Parents want their children to belong, and to know that other 'normal' children understand that all children have an equal right to access programs available, at the same time increasing opportunities for friendships outside the school. Parents want to know the gains their child has made because of integration.

Lindsey, I know, has made great progress this year. She is attending better, maintaining eye contact, using sign, recognising family and classmates...

This must clearly be attributed to those people involved with her and her program, but recognition of Lindsey's classmates appreciation of her as a person first, with the right to try, to succeed or to fail, and to discover as a belonging member of Room 4, has, I believe, made all the difference.