



Looking at Lessons Through *Their* Eyes

Tips for Modifying Lessons for Diverse Learners

by Vangie Rodenbeck

You've just learned that you will have a student in your class who has special needs. The need could be a learning delay, a language barrier, a physical or developmental disability. You know you'll need to modify some of the activities suggested in the lesson materials so this learner can be included with the other students. But how do you do that? What do you need to know?

First, find out what the student's abilities are—and some of the challenges. Then look at your lesson materials through the student's eyes. The following ideas will help you.

“THAT’S HARD FOR ME TO DO.”

Fine-motor skills. Many children, teens, and adults affected by a disability struggle with fine-motor skills. Holding paper, cutting, writing, painting, drawing, coloring, and even grasping small objects can be frustrating. Ask yourself ahead of time if you can take any of the following steps to modify an activity:

- Precut paper or shapes for a craft project
- Provide objects that can be grasped with the whole hand in a fist, rather than with fingers
- Provide extra time. The student may want to finish a project at her own pace while the rest of the class moves on to another activity. Having a buddy for this learner could be helpful.

Be prepared to offer assistance, but remember to ask permission to help. Encourage the student to do as much as possible on her own.

“SHOW ME.”

Visual aids. The use of a picture or icon can greatly enhance the classroom experience for a student who experiences hearing loss or a delay in processing language. Much more than just pretty pictures, visual tools can keep a learner from becoming confused as he struggles to stay caught up with what is happening. When planning the visual components needed for any lesson or learning activity, ask yourself the following questions:

- Are the classroom rules and expectations visually stated?
- In addition to the oral/verbal directions, how can I provide a visual aid for the directions I am giving?



Looking at Lessons Through *Their* Eyes

- As I tell the story (or lead an activity), is there a picture I can show that will tell the story along with me?
- Can we review the focus or the story in a way that uses visual aids or props?
- How can I model what I want the students to do? (Examples: hop, take one step forward)

“MY BRAIN NEEDS A BREAK.”

Time. One of the easiest adaptations you can make is to shorten the duration of an activity. The attention span of learners with special needs may not be that of typical peers their age. You can abbreviate the details of some stories/activities without affecting the intent of the lesson. As you are planning your lesson, consider the following:

- Do I have any students whose attention span is shorter than what is average for the age level?
- Can I break the lesson down into manageable learning segments?
- Can I shorten the lesson segments, keeping them to 5 minutes for learners under age 10 and 8 minutes for learners ages 10 and up?

For ideas on moving learners smoothly from one lesson segment to another, be sure to check out the transition tips provided in this article and in the lesson materials.

“WHAT DOES *THAT* MEAN?”

From abstract to concrete. Many learners with special needs experience difficulty with abstract language. Idioms and figurative language make learning a confusing and sometimes fearful experience. When teaching about salvation, phrases such as “giving your heart to Jesus” and “covered by Jesus’ blood” can be puzzling to literal, concrete thinkers. As you are preparing lessons, ask yourself:

- Is there a way that I can make this abstract concept concrete for the learner with special needs?
- For the learner who is showing interest in or asking questions about salvation, can I draw a picture showing a comparison that would help him understand the concept more readily than just using figurative language?
- Is there an object lesson or science experiment that would make this abstract concept visual and concrete?

“ANOTHER CHANGE?”

Transitions. For many children with special needs, especially during preschool years, one of the biggest challenges is transition in the classroom. This can mean anything from a change in regular classroom routine to the simple movement from one activity to another on any given day. Consider implementing the following ideas to make transitions easier:



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- Notify parents and caregivers ahead of time concerning any changes in classroom personnel, toys, decorations, and so on. If possible, take a picture and show the student how the room will be set up.
- Use visual aids, gestures, or icons to reinforce classroom rules and expectations.
- Strongly consider implementing a simple picture schedule that details the class's routine, allowing all students to anticipate the flow of activities. (Icons and instructions for making picture schedules are provided with the HeartShaper® Curriculum special needs resources!)
- As much as possible, keep the weekly classroom routine predictable, even if teachers or helpers change. This is beneficial for all learners.
- If students will be moving from the classroom to another area of the building (or from one group/age level to another), talk about each move ahead of time. If possible, talk with parents and consider the best ways to help their child make such moves.