



Cap sur l'école inclusive
en Europe



Best practice Welcoming young children with special needs

Section of the module /Educate

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1. Context

Institutions for Young Children aged from 6 months to 6 years

2. Goals

With regard to the public being welcomed, we will use the term "child with special needs" instead of "child with a disability or chronically ill". Indeed, "the term of children with specific needs applies when the intensity of the needs, related to the child's condition and his/her innate or acquired deficiencies, is such that it requires a significant qualitative or quantitative modification of the resources devolved to the child "(The inclusion of children with disabilities in reception environments).

*Finally, we will use the term "inclusion" as quoted in the official European texts: "It is not only about integrating children with disabilities but rather about creating a welcoming environment capable of accepting and taking into account the differences present in ALL children »
(Inclusion of children with disabilities in reception environments).*

This definition leads to a relatively important change of view since it is a question of moving from the conception in which the child must adapt, integrate, to its opposite: the institution aims at offering the conditions necessary to welcome all children.

- ***This sheet proposes the different steps to consider in order to identify the specificities in welcoming a child with a disability or "child with special needs".***

3. « Best practice » conduct

- ***Team composition :***

Teacher and / or AVS (Auxiliaire de Vie Scolaire, i.e. Auxiliary for School Life), AES (Accompagnant Educatif et Social, i.e. Educational and Social Support), Childcare Auxiliary, Educator for Young Children, Nurse trained in child care etc ..

Step 1: Identifying the obstacles to welcoming the child

Representations and emotions of the staff:

Welcoming children with specific needs, in the perception of professionals, is not obvious. Thus, several authors note that this welcoming often depends on the good will of a person rather than on a mission-based general conception of foster care facilities designed for young children.

One of the main reasons for the reluctance to this welcoming is an almost taboo element: professionals' fear and emotions. Indeed, handicap can be seen, it can cause physical deformations, bring children to have incomprehensible reactions especially in the case of Autistic Spectrum disorders. Children with chronic illness can also be affected in their body.

Authors say that these situations generate a feeling of guilt, notably Herrou and Korff-Sausse: "We are all guilty, the parents of having given birth to him / her, educators or caregivers of being unable to cure him / her or repair him/her, society of not succeeding in giving him / her a place worthy of the name. That is why disability causes a rejection that can take the most diverse forms.

Aggressiveness, but also indifference.

Rejection, but also fake solicitude.

Contempt, but also pity.

Ignorance but also overprotection."

In an EAJE (Etablissement d'Accueil des Jeunes Enfants, i.e. foster care facilities designed for young children or ECEC, Early Care and Education Center), it is necessary to take these elements into account. Indeed, we are all confronted with these emotions:

Disgust, rejection, pitying, protection, overprotection; in addition to these fears, elements of our personal life can be added.

Questions arise:

What does the child understand? What does he / she perceive? This questioning that refers us to what makes our humanity, to our perception of the norm, to "how to enter into communication" is "normal".

Foster care facilities' principals and managers need to think about these things so that each member of the team can express him- / herself, be heard, and expose their dreads and fears. In this long-term work, these reactions, these emotions can be updated and then lead, perhaps, to an opening, to a willingness by the team to welcome "the difference", especially children with special needs.

The sign of a lack of training

Preparing in advance welcoming as a team is a priority for foster care facilities (ECEC). Indeed, the main obstacle to welcoming children with special needs is the fear of this unknown child. This fear translates into a demand for specific training on disability. So, many professionals think that they are not trained to welcome these children. However, this training is not necessarily needed: indeed, there is too much variety of disabilities and diseases to go around.

Interindividual differences exist. For example, two children recognized as autistic are different in what they give to see. Therefore, disability training can't take this diversity into account.

On the other hand, working in advance on the professionals' representations, on fears, but also on what each professional can express of his / her possibilities and / or impossibilities is utmost important.

Indeed, some diseases return the professional to the fear of doing wrong, even of hurting. This is often the case for children who are welcomed and who eat by gastrostomy, for example.

Thus, training is relevant here in order to:

- gather professionals' representations, especially during team meetings, with an outside person;
- offer each professional, regardless of his / her diploma and status, training on early childhood development, on observation work;
- reassure professionals on the base of their professional tools: ability to decode non-verbal language through observation, ability based on what the child gives to see (and not on a knowledge of disability, for example) to adjust his / her real development (psychopedagogy);
- accompany professionals of the institution in a personalized way in the welcoming of that child with specific needs. In this case, partnerships with medical-social institutions will make it possible to inform professionals of a specific child's welcoming in a simple and adapted way.

Step 2: Changing the way people look at the child

"A girl, with a malformation-marked face, approaches a small boy astride a truck. The girl sketches a movement of the leg to make it clear that she wants to sit on the truck too. The boy said to her: "you have your nose cut!", while arranging a place behind him. And they both dart across the room. "

This observation is brought by the authors of the book *Collective Integration of Young Disabled Children*.

They go on:

"Paul expressed without apparent anxiety that he saw a difference in Sabine. Is this an anomaly for him? Nothing can be sure. It rather seems that it is the discovery of a particularity that he notices without anxiety. This doesn't prevent him from adopting Sabine as a playmate. No adult could have had Paul's frank and direct reaction, because Sabine's dysmorphic face appeals to our most troubled imagination.

Unlike children, adults anticipate the future and imagine for this little girl the burden of present and future obstacles that her disability will inevitably arouse. The vision of this face is, for the adult, synonymous with possible rejection, of his / her own rejection first, but also, in projection, that of others and of society as a whole.

This is why adults don't verbally express spontaneously their impression the way Paul does, because this little two-and-a-half-year-old boy only sees a difference that he names without prejudice. " By this quote, we perceive that what may be a specificity is more the responsibility of our general representations on difference, whatever it is. Nevertheless, there may be, indeed, a need for adaptation of the collective, of professionals' practices in welcoming a child with specific needs.

Professionals who are used to working with children, especially children with special needs, say that: first and foremost, children must be considered for what they are, that is, above all else, children.

Meeting other children, other adults is necessary. His / her family universe alone can't constitute his environment.

Step 3: Thinking on welcoming practices

As with any child, early childhood professionals are playing a role with young children. In a favourable context, the child will develop (or / and stabilize) sensory, motor, cognitive, language, social, emotional skills, but also his / her ability to adapt.

All of these dimensions are intertwined and each of them requires involving the others. However, the ECEC's mission is not to heal the child or to advance him / her. The ECEC must be a place where children spend time, regardless of progress or performance while being in a caring environment.

To do this, it is a question of updating the educational project, of favouring communication with the child, of fostering separation and reunion, of taking the individual into account in the collective and of promoting supports for relationship.

Updating the educational project:

Including a reflection on updating the educational project, with a view to welcoming each child, whatever he / she may be, involves an elaboration work by the whole team. Indeed, as for families in social integration and / or in difficulty, it is necessary to be particularly vigilant on continuity:

continuity with the parents for a quality of transmissions, in particular. The institutionalization of a reference person for the child and his / her family allows an even more efficient continuity. This avoids a repetition for the family of the difficulties that it can meet.

For the child, the layout of the space, the equipment available to him:
an educational thought can be worked on to promote this inclusion.

Favouring communication with the child:

For professionals, the issue of communication with the child may be central because it can be complex.

Some children will not look straight in the eyes, may not have a facial expression that allows to read their emotions (smile, grimace ...), may not respond directly to the solicitations *of the professional*. That is why, a *fine observation* will be necessary to try to give a meaning: what are his / her *gestures, postures or facial expressions to mark his / her assent, or his / her refusal?*

What are his / her motor skills? How to deal with him / her? What to say? What does he / she understand? It is important to keep in mind that this work of observation is true for any child, it is a tool that must be developed.

Many authors discuss observation in professional practice (E. Bick, W. R. Bion, E. Pikler; cf. *Accompanying the child to build his / her identity and apprehend otherness*).

Maryse Hendrix, in *The Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Settings*, says more specifically: "Communication with the disabled child will certainly place early childhood professionals in difficulty at times. Yet their specific skills are a great asset: more than other workers, they excel in decoding needs that are not expressed by speech. In this, they unknowingly possess expertise in the field of disability."

To be noted:

Interesting tools are available about communication: Makaton, signed French (www.makaton.fr). These forms of communication are interesting because they are addressed to all without distinction. Many ECECs who practice them express high regard for them as concerns very young children, for these "pluses" and the discovery of potentialities they did not imagine. For example, one school set up a 20-word lexicon in sign language.

Fostering separation and reunion:

The child with special needs, too, must be able to benefit from extra-family care.

Indeed, separation, that is to say knowing how to leave, to return, to meet again, is important for the child as for his / her parents, especially for his / her attachment figure.

Indeed, these children and their families often live in a family confinement, allowing them to open is a mission of ECECs.

Taking the individual into account among the collective:

Working in ECECs includes a collective aspect but also a need to take into account the individual among the collective.

Here, creating small groups of children, developing playing conditions that foster relationships between children, having empathy will also be necessary.

Reflecting on the distribution of children: welcoming them in a section depending on the level of development? Like the layout of the space, think of the moments of transition. But isn't this already the daily work in ECECs?

To be noted:

According to Herrou and Korff-Sausse, in *Collective Integration of Young Children with Disabilities* (pp. 22-23) "Usually, integration is practiced on an individual basis, that is to say it means welcoming a single disabled child in a group of normal children. Research on the integration of the handicapped child in nursery and kindergarten [...] highlighted the loneliness of the disabled child integrated into a group. [...] In these situations, the child doesn't meet any child like him [...]. This is a difficult situation to handle: all alone, "not like the others". [...] that is why we believe that we can speak truly of integration only in its collective form, namely the simultaneous reception of several children with various handicaps within a group of valid children ... "

Promoting supports for relationship:

- Everyday supports: sounds, songs, nursery rhymes, musical instruments, tapping, hitting ... motor skills ...
- More specific supports that are enriching for everyone:
 - books to touch: website *The fingers that dream* (*Les doigts qui rêvent*, www.ldqr.org);
 - books to "read in the dark": Benjamins Media website (www.benjamins-media.org);
 - the institution can be enriched by a space for sensory exploration such as Snoezelen, designed for retirement homes (www.petrarque.fr/maisons-de-retraite/snoezelen.html), adaptable in many places with few means;
 - material with pins;
 - ideas can come from specialized catalogs like Hoptoys (www.hoptoys.fr).

But beware, it doesn't involve "falling" into activism. For some children with special needs, it may be necessary to stimulate the child. What matters is the quality of presence. Being there, settling into the group, responding to children's invitations to play or talk.

Mais attention, il ne s'agit pas de « tomber » dans l'activisme. Pour certains enfants à besoins spécifiques, peut-être sera-t-il nécessaire de stimuler l'enfant. Ce qui importe est la qualité de présence. Etre là, s'installer dans le groupe, répondre aux invitations des enfants à jouer ou à parler.

Step 4: Identifying the specific tools for welcoming

Drawing up an individualized welcoming project (PAI, i.e. Plan d'Accueil Individualisé), as for example in France

Professionals will have to comply with the personalized welcoming project established between the institution and the family, as stated in circular n° 2003-135 of September 8th, 2003 relative to the welcoming in community of children with health disorders: "An individualized welcoming project (PAI) is set up for a child suffering from chronic illness, allergy or food intolerance, hosted in the community. This is particularly the case for a child attending a nursery or day-care center, a school, a college, a high school or a holiday or leisure center. "

Identifying existing financial support for welcoming young children in the context of disability

Identifying partnerships

Partnerships can be formed for the accompaniment of children with special needs.

Avoiding mistakes

Thinking in terms of "deficit (s)", of "lack (s)" implicitly implies for the professional a desire to fill gaps. By doing so, the child's autonomy can be limited by too much anticipation from the professional, who doesn't leave room for the child to act. This may have the effect of considering the child only through his / her particularity and no longer, first, as a child. Teamwork, practice analysis work, a time for regulation must enable the elaboration of a thought that does not deny the reality of the child but can take it into account for a well-treating accompaniment.

Example:

I am director of an ECEC, we will welcome for the first time a child with special needs.

A member of the team asks me: how does this child manifest to others?

How much autonomy does he / she have?

Here, as for any child who is arriving in an ECEC, it should be a time of observation by a reference person. Over time, he / she can help to answer these questions by developing a detailed knowledge of the child. The professional, in his / her concern to welcome the child well, may want to significantly anticipate the arrival. However, this is not always desirable, because the risk is to see the child through what will be said and not through the observation of this specific child and what he / she does.

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