

Creating Learning Opportunities for Children with Disabilities

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Finding safe, secure and affordable learning opportunities when you are the parent of a child with disability is a daunting task. In this article, I will outline some steps I took with my son.

A survey of the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP) revealed that only 1.2 percent of persons with disability (PwDs) in India have had any form of education. In an all-India school level survey, NCPEDP found that of the 89 schools surveyed, 34 did not have a single disabled student and, unfortunately, 18 of them had a policy against giving admission to children with disabilities. (Sakhuja, 2004)

Disabilities which cause difficulties in learning include visual, speech and language and hearing impairments, affliction of the musculoskeletal or nervous system or both, learning disabilities and autism spectrum disorders, mental illness, disability caused by chronic neurological conditions, multiple disabilities and any other category which may be notified by the Central Government.

In the Indian education system, pedagogy depends heavily on textbooks and blackboards for visuals. This poses difficulties for children with auditory or/and visual processing problems. For them, activities involving drama, music, pictorials and use of audio-visual aids are essential, for example, learning the alphabet through sandpaper cut-outs, tracing letters, body movement (as in dancing), sounds, etc are more suitable. Similarly, activities that demonstrate concepts, such as rotation and revolution in geography, either through craft activities or role-play will ensure understanding. These multi-sensory teaching methods help a child to learn through more than one of the senses.

However, a child with disability may experience difficulties with either the visual or auditory or both of these modes. The child's visual processing may be affected, and she may have difficulties with tracking and directionality. The answer is in involving the use of two or more of the senses together in teaching, especially the use of the tactile (touch) and the kinetic (movement) by using both these to teach the formation of the alphabet

for example, encouraging the child to write the letters using shaving foam on a tray. This will give the child's brain hooks to hang their tactile and kinetic memories on as well as the visual and auditory ones.

For teaching children with disabilities everything has to be tangible: in the words of a seasoned special educator 'first object then, abstract'. The classroom and other teaching environments should give children ample opportunities for learning to happen in the form of play and the emphasis on early reading and writing skills has to take a backseat. One day, when I was giving my son a sensory break in the special educator's room at his school with the help of a gym ball and a yoga mat, the child whose session was going on with the special educator was attracted by all the movements of the gym ball – he preferred to learn through his body. Also, children who have difficulties in learning, need to learn from their bodies by doing everything with their hands. Every action teaches them new words, their bodies need ample movements much more than other children to improve their alertness and enable sustained focus and attention levels in classrooms where they tend to easily lose track of what is being taught. They may need the teacher to stop and repeat the concepts many times so that they can grasp the basic idea.

Play therapists are doing amazing work with children having any form of disability, devising fun ways to help them be a part of groups. At the same time, occupational therapists design exercises and activities customised to the child's needs.

Though CBSE has made it mandatory for every school to have a special educator, sadly, in most schools, the special educators are either poorly trained or function with a standby teacher substituting for an absent teacher or lending a hand during examinations or sports activities. In most

cases, there is only one special educator for fifteen to twenty students belonging to different grades and with different levels of difficulties. The special educator at my son's school could take his session only once a week to help him with academics. Due to poor visibility (in terms of direct interactions with parents) and the fact that remuneration and long working hours do not match their qualifications, the attrition rate is very high and special educators keep on hopping jobs. This is a serious issue, since it results in making their students feel insecure. For students with disabilities, the learning environment has to be a predictable, emotionally safe place and for this, a sustained and strong bond between the educator and the child is essential.

Private special education and occupational therapy sessions cost anywhere between Rs 400-Rs 600 per session lasting from 45 minutes to an hour, which many of the parents cannot afford. This takes a severe toll on the financial stability of parents, especially when they need to save for their futures as well, as these therapies can go on for four to five years. If facilities for special education as well as occupational therapy, language and speech therapy are made available at the school, parents will not only save time and money but also have the option of offering their child with disability other experiences, like enrolling them for a skill class where the child's inner strengths and interests can emerge, for example, pottery, art and craft, multimedia, drama, music, sports, cooking and baking. In tier two and tier three cities, there are perhaps one or two centres that offer the required therapies and schools do not have even one special educator, whereas in metro cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, a new centre comes up every week. There are schools that have the best team of professionals, but these schools charge exorbitant fees, rendering them unaffordable to the majority of parents.

It must be pointed out that there are no guidelines from the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) on this aspect of education. The RCI and CBSE need to come together to formulate guidelines for regulation of various agencies working in this area. Only recently, it made attendance mandatory for students pursuing diploma and B.Ed. courses in various disabilities in private institutions – this is a step in the right direction. Schools need to screen children every year and provide the required interventions which can be as simple as using more and varied teaching and learning materials.

Children with low attention spans will benefit hugely through games and exercises designed in consultation with an occupational therapist. The sooner the school and parents identify children having difficulties in keeping up with the rest of the classroom academically, cognitively and socially and pinpoint the underlying issues with the help of professionals, like developmental paediatricians, special educators and occupational therapists, the better it is for these children. They can be provided a customised plan from the elementary school onwards. This will help schools to integrate children in a mainstream classroom as far as possible so that students can access the curriculum and content of general education and develop positive peer friendships which will, in turn, give them a richer and more secure foundation for learning.

Learning never happens in isolation nor on the basis of shaky emotional wellbeing. As much as the children need to work on their weaknesses, they also need the environment of a regular classroom to prepare them for the future, to nurture them into growing into smart, secure and confident adults. This cannot happen in the sheltered walls of a special setup. Thus, our teachers need to be sensitised about the different types of disabilities in their varying degrees, besides developing strategies to help them to ensure equal participation of all children in the classroom. The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) is proving to be a boon for students with disabilities as it allows children to complete their academic goals at their own pace without facing any ridicule and undue pressure.

At a time where open book exams are being considered even for neurotypical students to prevent them from just mugging up answers, we need to create similar systems for students with disabilities to help them prepare for a dignified independent life which is a must for inclusivity. Currently, the situation is fraught with a lack of commitment and integrity. For example, schools are known to refuse, first, to modify the curriculum for individual students despite having full knowledge of the child's disability and, later, to fail the child.

Teachers can use multi-media presentations in performing their tasks. However, the high-profile schools which have now adopted smart boards do not allow their teachers time to use these as they are rushing to complete the syllabus on time. The high teacher-to-student ratio is another hurdle in preparing and using teaching and learning materials to cater to the individualised needs of children with disabilities.

Some of my learnings

I got a chance to shadow my son, who is on the autism spectrum disorder (ASD), during his last month at a 'normal' school. It was evident that children in the class had different learning, attention and focus levels, with around ten children having learning disabilities due to different underlying issues. A girl who had emotional issues was not able to complete her work in most classes, while the same girl was quite enthusiastic during Abacus class, in which she answered most of the questions correctly when the teacher repeated the questions clearly and patiently. The teacher's perseverance helped her perform.

Parents of children with complete language abilities but having other learning disabilities tend to ignore teachers' warnings for getting the child assessed. In such cases, the school could provide assistance and guidance. A team of developmental experts and special educators at the school could invite parents to observe their child both in the classroom as well as outside of it and decide for themselves where exactly the child is struggling.

Bare classroom walls make children dull, they should be filled with children's creations. My son loves to draw vehicles, cartoon characters and recreate the graphics of mobile games. Instead of only clapping for marks achieved in a test, thereby, creating a benchmark for academic excellence in young minds, let us applaud these non-academic achievements, as well. In today's world, we are constantly reminded that marks achieved in board exams do not guarantee success later in life. Those who lagged behind in studies throughout their school life have successfully created unique enterprises.

Schools today have the infrastructure and resources to provide their students a stimulating learning environment. A small effort has to be made to use these creatively. Another observation is that the daily timetable should be planned in such a way that children are given movement breaks, physical exercises and other sensory breaks at regular intervals helping them be and do their best with complete alertness and concentration levels during academic periods. For example, a school in Delhi takes children skating in their zero period before starting the day.

My seven-year-old has not been able to keep pace with the school's academic curriculum due to his learning difficulties and sensory issues (which are some of the co-morbidities of autism), but his

classmates are in awe of his ability to memorise spellings and swimming and underwater skills. When they met me, they had so many questions: Why does Heramb do this or that? Why is he not regular to school these days (the school did not allow him without a shadow teacher)? A major challenge is finding a good shadow teacher (educational assistant) as there is no organisation so far for training them and schools do not have the time and motivation to provide an in-house teacher or support staff to fit the role.

As a parent of a child with a disability, some days are tough with stone-cold gazes following me when I am trying to help my child pick up a skill; with people refusing to use fresh ideas or change their methods. One feels like hiding with one's child safe and secure in one's arms, away from world's judgmental looks. But do not allow your weaker self to do that, you will not only be doing a disservice to your child but also to many more children along the way. For every harsh comment I have got, I have received enough unexpected warmth in particularly difficult situations to keep me going and do whatever it takes to help my child reach his potential.

In this day to day struggle with teaching children with disabilities, we often tend to forget that first and foremost, he or she is a child. I still remember that after being handed a diagnosis for my son, for six months I completely forgot to take his pictures, when earlier I used to click every smile and every move courtesy today's smartphones. While running from pillar to post for therapies, do not forget to give the child ample time in open air and spaces. These helped my son immensely, addressing his many sensory and sleep issues, while creating fun learning opportunities as well. Personally, I do not understand this special tag – special-needs child, special school, special setup, so on and so forth – so will we go ahead and have special colleges, hospitals, banks, malls also?

Though the Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD)'s interventions and Delhi governments online admission drive for children with disabilities, forcing the schools in their neighbourhood to take them on board, has helped parents secure a seat for their child in a school, it is only the beginning of a long, perilous journey of constant fighting with the school authorities for the child's rights. If today we shy away from this fight, we must then stop dreaming of an inclusive society in the future.

References

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