



Inclusion Confusion: Where does my child with high functioning autism belong?

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Parents of children with special needs frequently hear debates about inclusion – most often referring to whether or not their child should attend a classroom, a school or even a summer camp that is designed for typically developing children. While there are debates about this for any type of disability involved, when the subject is a child with autism spectrum disorder, the arguments become more heated. Perhaps the most confusion about inclusion arises when the issue concerns high functioning autism or Asperger syndrome (HFA/AS).

What inclusion issues are unique to HFA/AS?

Children who have autism but normal, or near normal, intelligence, pose unusual challenges for educational professionals as well as for parents. Many of these children are the product of intensive behavioral home programs implemented prior to attending public schools. They made early, rapid and extensive progress in areas of cognitive, social and communication ability. For example, by age five or six, some of these children have mastered, or are capable of mastering, a regular kindergarten or first grade curriculum. They speak when spoken to, and many of them demonstrate spontaneous and appropriate speech. They have learned some skills that will enable them to interact with peers, at least at an age appropriate level – sharing, joining a game, imitat-

ing. However, for children with Asperger syndrome in particular, it is in this latter category of social skills that the most obvious deficits remain, no matter how high the child's intelligence level.

Findings indicated that the children with autism were chosen for activities and social events (e.g., games at recess, birthday parties) as much as their classmates with and without disabilities, and they were considered members of peer groups.

The dilemma is that in order for many of these children to continue to progress, they need to be in the presence of typical peers who can model appropriate language, social skills and play skills. Often they require an in-class tutor or therapist, trained behaviorally and knowledgeable about the child's skill level and modes of skill acquisition. Some school districts don't allow a non-district paraprofession-

al in the classroom, and most don't want to pay for one, even if they do allow it, thus spawning a wave of contested hearings and litigation.

In cases where reason prevails, all parties (e.g. educators, attorneys, parents) consider the evidence base for inclusion. The majority of studies on this issue have focused on autism spectrum disorder more broadly, without specific reference to the higher functioning children. In this month's column, we report some of the findings that we hope will shed light on this particular issue for children with HFA/AS.

Is there evidence in favor of including children with autism in regular classes?

In the last five years, journals have contained studies reporting the benefits of including children with autism in regular or general education classes. Harrower and Dunlap (2001), summarizing this literature, noted both positive academic and social outcomes of placing children with autism in general education, or regular, classes. Academically, educational goals were more developmentally advanced, and expectations were higher, in the regular class. Socially, benefits included opportunities for more and richer engagement with peers, resulting in larger friendship networks. Advances in social inclusion of students with autism were also highlighted in a 2005 study by Boutot and Bryant. While these investigators did not study

children with HFA/AS per se, they did report that 70% of the children with autism, ages 7 to 11, were high functioning. Their focus was on the level of social acceptance of the children with autism (relative to other members of the classroom), their social impact (how well they were known by peers) and social network affiliations (whether or not they are considered members in a peer group.) Findings indicated that the children with autism were chosen for activities and social events (e.g., games at recess, birthday parties) as much as their classmates with and without disabilities, and they were considered members of peer groups.

Parents, when interviewed, have not always agreed that inclusion is appropriate for their child, often opting for a lesser degree of mainstreaming than full

inclusion. Connie Kasari and her colleagues at University California Los Angeles, examining opinions about inclusion, found that parents of children with Down Syndrome were generally favorable, while about half of the parents of children with autism did not think inclusive education would meet their child's needs. Without a doubt, parents' biggest concern about inclusion centers on social acceptance of their child by others.

Is there a conclusion to all of this inclusion confusion?

Yes. Including children with HFA/AS in regular classes does seem to be supported by the research to date. There is evidence that inclusion for these higher functioning children expands their repertoire of social skills, and improves

their acceptance by peers.

Still, there are some important caveats that parents and teachers, as well as inclusion specialists, should keep in mind. First, students who do not have challenging behavior problems are better candidates for inclusion. Second, social inclusion and acceptance is facilitated when teachers and peers are informed of the included child's capabilities and strengths, as well as his vulnerabilities and social skills deficits. Third, due to the very nature of this particular disability, the included child will likely require continued intervention around social skill development. **EP**

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