

Voices from the Field: Samtra Devard



Samtra Devard, the mother of three children, including one who has a disability, shares how practitioners play an important role in fostering peer interactions and her perspective as a parent on the long term benefits of developing relationships with typically developing peers early.

The role that typical peers played in my daughter’s early education program made a huge impact on the growth we were able to see in my daughter’s development. I was not able to anticipate the impact beforehand. But taking that leap of faith, coupled with a great early educator—our daughter had a wonderful experience.

Peers provided my daughter with an example of what a child her age might be doing. The goal wasn’t for that peer to be an example or even set the standard for how my daughter should be. But it was a person with whom my daughter had something in common—their age. It is important to note that while peers serve a wonderful benefit for children with disabilities, there is a benefit for children without disabilities as well.

The kids just had welcoming, accepting hearts! They genuinely want to just play with my daughter. And my daughter could check out what kinds of things they were doing. And her natural desire to connect and remain connected was a natural motivator for her to do some of the things we wanted to see her do.

The teacher made all of the difference! While a special educator, the teacher was simply a good open-hearted person who valued all of the children equally. It was obvious! While she valued them all equally, she recognized and gladly met each of their unique needs.

My daughter’s teacher convinced me that we should embark on the journey of potty training my daughter. And we succeeded! The teacher led the way. She would provide cues when other students asked to go to the bathroom. Things like—“Look at Katie. She has to use the bathroom. Do you need to use the bathroom?” This pointed out action and also an opportunity to enhance communication.

Over the course of the school year, things we wanted to see happen began happening. And equally important, my daughter was making friends.

At those young ages, play is the great equalizer. All kids want to play and that is how essential skills and social interactions are fostered. All kids can be shy. Adults have to keep an eye out for any child (whether they have a disability or not) who seems to be excluded. That exclusion could be resulting from their own withdrawal or the exclusion could be happening because the students need help with how to connect with an individual child. But the important ingredient is for the culture of the classroom culture to already be established as one that is welcoming, accepting, respectful and kind.

We were able to see our daughter help cultivate even greater empathy, compassion and confidence in the children who had no disabilities. Our daughter always had great manners. She was able to model things like saying please and thank you for other kids!

One thing that I can see now is that early childhood settings and schools are the starting place for connections to happen. For those benefits to be long lasting, those connections have to be cultivated outside of the school setting into other areas of life. Birthday parties, playdates and other community activities should be encouraged so that there is a long term benefit that can be realized.

But even if the relationships with the people she met early didn't last, the skill of making friends and being in new settings has remained. I can see my daughter's willingness to meet new people, to not shy away from a new experience and to make connections. She is very empathetic so she is able to bring a positive energy to people.