

Learners with Exceptionalities

Authors' Note: We are often asked to discuss how Montessori programs respond to children with special needs. To address this important question, we turned to Dr. Ann Epstein, one of the outstanding Montessori educators who has a special interest in children who, for various development reasons, respond differently than most children to various learning settings

Like all parents, parents of children with exceptionalities search for learning environments that will match the strengths and needs of their children. This is one of the most crucial responsibilities of parenthood: to assure that one's children are able to learn and grow in an environment that is both challenging and nurturing. Parents oversee each day of their children's learning. They must watch over, perhaps even guard, their children's academic and social progress every day of every year. And they have the awesome reward of watching their children grow and succeed.

But parents of children who learn differently (or perhaps look, move, or talk differently) have an extra set of challenges. The neighborhood public school district may or may not provide the atmosphere that matches their child's very particular learning style. With reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997, parents of children who are eligible for special needs services have become active collaborators with teachers in the development and implementation of their children's educational plans.

This holds true for parents in public as well as private school settings. Although independent schools have more latitude in designing policies and

procedures for parentally placed children with disabilities in their programs, IDEA requires administrators and teachers to work collaboratively with parents. Guide-lines for creating effective parent collaboration within IDEA's legislated framework are presented later in this chapter.

IDEA currently recognizes ten categories of exceptionality. They are listed in order of highest to lowest frequency of occurrence. Percentages refer to numbers of children who are being provided special education services.

- ▲ **Specific Learning Disabilities** (51.1%, includes children with reading, writing and math difficulties, as well as children who have challenging behaviors such as attention deficit disorder)
- ▲ **Speech or Language Impairments** (20.8%)
- ▲ **Developmental Delay** (also referred to as mental retardation) (11.6%)
- ▲ **Serious Emotional Disturbance** (8.7%)
- ▲ **Other Health Impairments** (2.2%, includes children with asthma)
- ▲ **Hearing Impairments** (1.3%)
- ▲ **Orthopedic Impairments** (1.2%)
- ▲ **Visual Impairments** (0.5%)
- ▲ **Autism** (0.5%)
- ▲ **Traumatic Brain Injury** (0.1%)

Special educators urge parents and education professionals to consider each child as a unique individual, which is also a central tenant of the Montessori philosophy. Each child with a learning disability is completely

unique, with his or her own specific strengths and areas of weakness.

Although there are certainly common characteristics among children in each group, it is of utmost importance to consider each child individually. IDEA recognized this by mandating "child-first language." Thus, we do not speak of the deaf child or the ADD child or the mentally retarded child. We put the child first. We speak of the child who is deaf, the child who has attention deficit disorder, and the child who has developmental delays.

At first glance this appears to be an over-emphasis on semantics. But a closer look reveals a profound difference in positioning the child before the label. Continually placing the emphasis on the child rather than the label assures that parents and educators always focus on who this child is, not on his or her array of special needs.

A Natural Fit

A focus on the individual child is also a major principle of Montessori education. Often parents contact Montessori schools in the hope of finding an atmosphere that will nurture their exceptional learner's growth.

What is it about Montessori environments that attract parents of children with exceptionalities? They may have heard that Montessori environments are designed around a principle of choice; children with exceptionalities often thrive in this kind of a learning environment. One child may be interested in experimenting with objects that either sink or float, while another may decide to wash, peel, slice and serve celery. Another child may have learned that the number *twelve* is comprised of one ten and two units and wants to continue learning about teens.

With appropriate guidance from the teacher(s), hundreds of choices are



available to children. Not only do they enjoy the freedom of choosing, they form the essential life-long developmental characteristics of (1) being independent thinkers and (2) accepting responsibility for one's choices. These two learning characteristics are key protectors against parents' natural tendency to be over-protective of their exceptional children. The prepared learning environment is carefully designed to provide children with the opportunity to choose activities that attract their curiosity.

In the early 1900s, Dr. Maria Montessori developed her philosophy and designed her curriculum by working with children with exceptionalities in Rome's poorest neighborhoods. She implemented a carefully structured daily routine of discovery-based learn-

ing. She carefully placed nutrition, rest, and hygiene along with math, reading, and writing lessons.

Dr. Montessori was awed by the progress her charges made, both physically and cognitively. She recognized that by respecting each child's unique way of learning (later we termed this the child's learning style), teachers and parents could provide a structure of learning success for all children.

Dr. Montessori then applied this philosophy and her emerging curriculum to children from Italy's middle- and upper-class families. The results were the same. Children not only progressed, but when compared to children in the typical schools of the early twentieth century, they excelled.

The fit between the Montessori philosophy and curriculum and children with exceptionalities is rooted in two essential responsibilities of the teacher. The Montessori teacher must observe and understand each child's style of learning. Throughout the course of the day, Montessori teachers watch how children respond to lessons and pursue independent activities. They note which activities bring particular delight to children, as well as those which appear to be frustrating.

They watch how children interact with one another and with adults. Are some children demonstrating emerging signs of leadership skills? Do some children struggle to express their thoughts and feelings? Are there patterns to children's challenging behaviors (particular time of day, with some children but not with others, during transition times)?

In addition to being keen observers, Montessori teachers are responsible for carefully preparing the learning environment. Each day, children choose from among dozens of thoughtfully prepared activities. Each activity is designed for independent, successful learning. Thus, children with exceptionalities will meet with success rather than frustration.

The principle of learning task analysis (breaking each skill into sequential parts) aids in assuring that children will develop skills and understanding step by step. For example, learning to tie shoes can be daunting for children with fine-motor delays. The Montessori teacher designs bead stringing and lacing activities to build eye-hand coordination. Gluing, working with clay, and painting also build fine-motor skills.

Months, perhaps a year or more, of interesting work with frustration-free, self-chosen activities gradually builds skills. Eventually, children become comfortable with the first step in making a shoestring loop. With more prac-

tice, and bit by bit, they learn to make a second loop, wrap it around the first loop, tuck it through a special space, pull it through and create that long-sought bow!

In summary, Montessori environments often meet the needs of children with exceptionalities. Teachers are keen observers of each child's unique strengths as well as her areas of need. Using these observations, they prepare activities that allow children to develop skills step by successful step. Children choose and pursue these carefully designed activities, building skills and developing conceptual understanding.

Does the Montessori approach fit "best practices" from the field of special education?

Key principles of early intervention and elementary special education are imbedded in many Montessori environments. In order to address the needs and build the strengths of an exceptional learner, teachers and parents must understand the child's "present levels of performance."

Although Montessori teachers are not usually trained or certified to perform standardized tests of cognition or physical or social/emotional development, they bring a wealth of detailed information to planning meetings from their ongoing observations. Combining their classroom observations with testing results and parents' observations creates a rich understanding of the child's present levels of performance.

Special educators develop measurable short-term objectives to guide daily classroom learning. Montessori teachers break skills and concepts into sequential steps. Sequenced activities (referred to as children's "work") fit quite well into an exceptional learner's short-term objectives. For example, a child may be struggling with two-digit

addition. The objective might be stated as, "Sally will solve two-digit, static addition problems with 90 percent accuracy using hands-on materials." The Montessori teacher will assist Sally in reviewing units and tens with a variety of concrete math manipulatives. She will also review single-digit addition, again with hands-on, interesting materials.

The special educator will build these activities into a schedule of day-to-day lessons, noting when Sally is successful and when she experiences difficulty. Her errors will be analyzed to identify where her understanding breaks down (more task analysis). When Sally is able to complete nine of ten problems successfully, the objective will be marked "complete."

In addition to identifying present levels of performance and developing measurable short-term objectives, early interventionists and special educators use ongoing methods of assessment. Data related to the learner's objectives are recorded daily. This is consistent with the Montessori teacher's practice of recording observations on a regular basis. The teacher may need guidance in data recording, but this essential special-education practice is consistent with Montessori practices.

Finally, special educators (and especially early interventionists) work hand in hand with parents. IDEA mandates collaborative planning with parents, especially sharing all assessment results.

Across all realms of education (public and private), children are more successful in school when their parents are fully informed and consistently involved. Dr. Montessori celebrated the family's contribution to all aspects of child development (cognitive, physical, and spiritual), instructing teachers to work closely with parents to assure optimal growth for all children.

The Parental Experience of Exceptionalities

In the mid-1980s, Marge Samels founded Parents Supporting Parents of Maryland, Inc., a parent-designed statewide network providing support to families of children with emotional problems. Drawing on her own experience, Ms. Samels described feelings that confront parents of children with exceptionalities. She authored the following paragraphs to begin workshops for parents of children with emotional disorders. Twenty years later, her powerful description continues to ring true for parents of children with a range of exceptionalities.

"Discovering that your child has special needs started you off on what may have become a complete change in your lifestyle and view of the future. The emotions that go along with this adjustment are often overwhelming, and they are overwhelming because many of these feelings are with you all day, every day. These feelings don't just visit your home and family; they move right in. Just who are these often less than welcome visitors?"

Uncertainty: This is the uncertainty of not knowing if the next minute will bring crisis or calm; the uncertainty of usually having no answers to your questions; the uncertainty about what kind of person your child will become; the uncertainty of not being sure how other family members are doing through all the crises.

Grief: There is the frequent pain that comes with watching your dreams for your child slip through your very hard-working hands. There is the day-to-day sadness of sharing your child's frustrations, failures, and fears. There is the disappointment of seeing hopes for other parts of your life fade as your struggle to be a parent interferes with job, financial security, marriage, and family life as whole

***Isolation:** There is the near total aloneness you may feel at listening to parents, whose children are not struggling with special needs, trade wonderful stories. Your extended family may provide no relief as they may be as likely to judge you guilty as to understand you supportively. And then there are the professionals whose reactions, at times, may leave you questioning your sanity (or maybe theirs). Feeling isolated often haunts you when your child gets excluded or left out of things by others.*

***Helplessness:** Your feelings of helplessness probably come mostly from your never-ending wish to cure your child totally and forever and your lack of success at making that wish come true. Then there is the day-to-day helplessness of using every tool you have to solve a problem, and nothing seems to make any difference. And all of this is made that much worse when you get reports that don't agree, so you can't even be sure what you are dealing with in the first place.*

***Loss of You:** You may have become almost completely used to having no time for yourself. Adult friendship – what's that? Hobbies? Leisure time? Shopping for fun? This only leaves you more vulnerable to all the other feelings swirling around you.*

***Anger:** It may often seem like you are angry at the whole world; angry at yourself for not knowing what to do; angry at your child for demanding so much and seeming to give so little back; angry at your family, friends and professionals for blaming you rather than helping you; angry that the needed services aren't available or take forever to access; and we could probably go on and on and on . . .*

Taken together, these feelings probably stress you to the edge of burnout, if not over the edge and beyond. Even with all of that you haven't given up. Your determination has brought you to this (meeting). Take a few minutes as you read these words on this page, in this room, with the others around you, and honor your strength.

Ms. Samels identifies the strong, sometimes life-altering emotions involved with being the parent of a child with an exceptionality. Montessori schools can assist parents in this emotional journey by implementing a carefully designed set of policies and procedures. IDEA provides a sound structure to support Montessori policies and procedures.

Parental Rights under IDEA

The United States has provided strong legislative support for children with exceptionalities and their families. Beginning with Public Law 94-142 (the Education for All Handicapped Children Act) in 1975, educators, families and lawmakers have worked to provide clear and increasingly comprehensive support for children with exceptionalities. Currently, this support flows through IDEA.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was first passed in 1990, reauthorized in 1997, and awaits a second reauthorization in 2003. IDEA includes the following features.

- ☐ Parents have full participation and shared decision making in all aspects of identification and evaluation of children with exceptionalities.
- ☐ Confidentiality of records as well as access to all records and documents is required.
- ☐ Parents and school administrators are assured due process if appropriate procedures are not followed.

- ☐ Zero Reject/Free appropriate public education assures that all children with exceptionalities are served within the public school system.
- ☐ Child Find identifies and tracks the number of children within each state who qualify for services.
- ☐ Children with exceptionalities are served from birth to age twenty-one, including early-intervention services for children from birth to two years of age.
- ☐ Non-discriminatory evaluation protects children for whom English is a second language and/or children who grow up in families with low incomes



- ❑ The Individualized Education Program (IEP) assures that careful planning takes place to meet each child's unique set of strengths and areas of need.
- ❑ Children must be placed in the least-restrictive environment: the setting in which the child can best learn and is most like that of his/her peers.
- ❑ If a school is found to be out of compliance with IDEA, states must mandate and implement consequences.
- ❑ Advocacy is guaranteed for children with exceptionalities who do not have known parents or guardians.

Several features are particularly important for parents of children with exceptionalities who decide to enroll their children in private schools. Full participation in decision making, confidentiality of records, non-discriminatory evaluation, the least-restrictive environment, and individualized education programs hold the spirit of the law. Although private schools are not mandated to implement IDEA, those with inclusive missions and a professed commitment to partnering with parents truly have responsibilities to children with exceptionalities and their families.

If they are committed to best educational practices, they need to work collaboratively with parents to create and implement programs that meet children's specific needs. They need to maintain confidential records and share them with parents. They need to advise and support parents in securing nondiscriminatory evaluations. And finally, they need to work with families to create a learning environment that is the most like that of the child's non-disabled peers.

IDEA includes specific provisions in Part B for parentally placed children in private schools. The local school dis-

trict (often referred to as the "local education agency" or LEA) must work with private schools to plan what services will be provided. Local school districts allocate services through consultation with private schools, underscoring the importance of thoughtful, timely, active participation on the part of private-school administrators. Parents can and should inquire as to the Montessori school's involvement with their local public schools.

IDEA includes a specific formula for identifying available funding for parentally placed children in private schools. Funding is based upon the total number of eligible (not necessarily those being served but all those identified) children in the district and the district's total flow through allocation. The later figure is typically decided by the local school board.

The following services could be partially funded, at the discretion of the local school district: speech pathology, occupational therapy, physical therapy, reading or math lab, classroom assistive hearing devices, sign-language interpreter, reader, consultations with the private school classroom teacher, teacher training, and professional development for private school personnel.

It is important to emphasize that parentally placed children do **not** have individual entitlements to services. Local school districts, in consultation with private schools, determine what services will be provided given the available district funding. Due process is applicable to violations regarding identification and evaluation of children; however, due process procedures do not apply to complaints that a local public school district has failed to meet requirements for provision of services. The Council for American Private Education (CAPE) developed an IDEA Tool Kit to assist parents and educators in understanding the law and finding services.

Questions for the Montessori Parent/School Team

Parents and teachers may find it helpful to consider three sets of "Essential Questions" as families proceed through three phases of involvement with the school. Initially, parents and teachers need to determine if a Montessori environment is the best setting for the child. Characteristics of both the particular school and the individual child need to be studied in order to assess potential for a successful placement.

Theoretically, Montessori schools offer a potentially positive experience for children with exceptionalities. However, schools range in how they apply Montessori principles. Perhaps more importantly, a continuum exists regarding administrative and faculty willingness to include children with exceptionalities. And, certainly, each child's exceptionality presents unique challenges to his or her family and school setting.

The following questions may be useful in identifying whether a particular Montessori school could provide a positive experience for a child with exceptionalities.

Part One: Beginning the Journey, Building Hope

Questions for the Family

- 1 Are the teacher and the administration willing to make changes to accommodate for my child's special needs? (For example, shorten lessons, modify homework, provide behavioral support, assure wheelchair accessibility.)
- 2 Do the teacher and the administration appear comfortable explaining my child's special needs to his/her classmates so my child can begin to make friends?

3 Will the school work collaboratively with my child's therapists (speech, occupational or physical therapist, family counselor)?

4 Do I feel welcomed and included when I am in the school environment with my child?

5 Can I picture my child feeling welcomed and included in the classroom?

Questions for the School

1 Do we fully understand the child's exceptionality?

2 Has the family shared test results?

3 Are we willing to make accommodations within the classroom (modify lessons, assist with choosing work, provide behavioral support, assure wheelchair accessibility)?

4 Can we modify the environment throughout the school (cafeteria, playground, hallways, gym, etc.) to provide needed support for the child?

5 Do we (teacher, administration and, if appropriate, support teachers such as music, physical education, etc.) understand how to provide assistance for the child to progress both cognitively and socially/emotionally? If not, are we willing to learn how to provide the necessary assistance?

Often answers to these questions are: "Maybe," "I think so," or "We will do our best." Absolute "yeses" are not necessary for the child to be successful. Honest discussions and solid planning, however, *are* essential. Families and schools need to understand one another's abilities as well as limitations.

If the above questions have been discussed and admission is agreed upon, parents and educators can look forward to a potentially transforming experience. Teachers who honestly questioned their ability to meet the needs of children with exceptionalities but agreed to welcome and include children into their environments often report the experience as among their most rewarding teaching experiences. They report the accomplishment of implementing new teaching strategies and the joy of seeing the child progress.

An unanticipated and particularly rewarding aspect is the positive impact of the child's inclusion on his or her peers. The other children in the classroom demonstrate leadership, kindness, heartfelt interest, and sometimes ingenuity as they develop an understanding of their classmate's exceptionality.

Parents observe the development of these qualities in their children, recognizing the decidedly beneficial aspects of including children with exceptionalities in typical classrooms.

With successes, parents and educators encounter challenges and frustrations. Keeping communications open while consistently monitoring the outcome of varied teaching strategies is essential. The following questions may assist the parent/educator team in maintaining progress.

Part Two: Working Together, Assessing Progress

Questions for the Family

1 Am I staying informed of my child's progress with regular home/school communications?

Note: An array of communication vehicles exist (email, telephone, face-to-face, daily journals); teachers and families need to find vehicles that work well for their partnership.

2 Do we understand and support current objectives and the strategies being implemented to attain these objectives?

3 Is my child participating with success in both classroom and auxiliary activities (art, physical education, etc.)?

4 Are my child's teacher and his/her therapists sharing regular updates?

5 Do I have a clear understanding of what teaching methods are working well for my child?

6 If my child is not making progress, do I understand what changes are being proposed? Do I agree with these changes? Is there a clear plan for implementing these changes and then assessing if they are successful?

Questions for the School

1 Do we have a clear understanding of the child's current learning and behavioral objectives?

2 Do we share regular updates with the family?

3 Are we maintaining consistent communications with the child's therapist(s)? Are teaching strategies consistent across school, therapy, and home environments?

4 Is the child making steady progress?

5 If the child is not making steady progress, are we working collaboratively with parents to identify alternative teaching strategies? Once these strategies are implemented, are we communicating regularly with the family to assess progress?

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- 6 If alternatives have been implemented and are not successful, are we providing the family with comprehensive assistance in transitioning to a new school setting?

All children eventually reach the point of transition from the current learning setting. For most children, this transition occurs because the child has made steady progress and has outgrown the current program. For some, the setting is no longer a good fit for their particular strengths and needs. In both situations, success for the learner depends on careful planning by the educators and families.

Part Three: Saying Good-Bye, Leaving Montessori

Questions for the Family

- 1 Do I fully understand my child's present levels of performance across all areas of learning (cognitive, social/emotional, language, motor)?
 - 2 If I am unsure of my child's present levels of performance, do I have resources I can access to arrange for quality assessments?
 - 3 Do I understand and agree with current learning objectives and long-range goals for my child? If not, have I communicated my concerns and begun the process of reassessing objectives and goals with my child's teacher (and therapists)?
 - 4 Do I know about other learning environments in my community that could provide an appropriate setting for my child?
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5 Have I met with teachers and administrators at potential new schools?

6 Has a meeting been arranged between my child's present teacher and my child's potential new teacher to discuss my child's current performance levels?

7 Is my child (when appropriate) involved with the transition?

■ Have we planned for my child to visit his/her new school several times while still enrolled in our current Montessori school?

■ Have we planned for my child to say good-bye to his/her classmates?

8 Have all my child's records been transferred to our new school?

9 Have I shared my feelings (whether positive or negative) and bid farewell with a sense of completion and peace?

Questions for the School

1 Are the child's records current? (present levels of performance across all learning domains, clearly stated objectives, clearly documented teaching strategies)?

2 Have we shared information about potential schools in our community with the family?

3 Have we assisted the family in arranging a meeting with the potential school administrator and teacher to share current information regarding the child's learning style and successful strategies?

4 Once the family selects another school, have we worked with the

family to arrange visits for the child to the new school?

5 Have we planned when and how the child will say good-bye to classmates?

6 Have we met with the family to share final farewells, providing an atmosphere where all share both positive and negative feelings?

7 If necessary, have we documented potential changes to school policy and procedures based upon our experiences with the family?

Several questions need to be asked throughout all three stages of the child's time with the Montessori community.

▲ Are all meetings, changes, assessments, and conversations documented?

▲ Are resources continually being provided for the family (Internet websites, current literature, other parent contacts, community resources, professional workshops)?

▲ Are we staying informed of local, state and federal legislation governing best practices for children with exceptionalities?

Learning in the Montessori Environment

The experiences of families of children with special needs vary greatly from school to school, and even from environment to environment within the same school. Many Montessori communities embrace children with a wide range of abilities, while others are reluctant to include learners with special needs. Many Montessori teachers welcome the opportunity to "broaden

the stream" or to expand their own professional experiences through learning how to adapt their environments to meet children's needs. Others are uncomfortable with adaptations, remarking that they are not trained nor is the Montessori classroom suited to respond to the special learning needs. It is essential that parents select a Montessori community that is open to and embraces children with varying strengths and areas of need.

Assuming that the family has selected a school with an inclusive philosophy, what is the day-to-day experience of a child with an exceptionality in a Montessori environment? The following vignettes provide brief glimpses of life in Montessori environments.

Justin

Justin is six years old and beginning the lower-elementary program. In a traditional school, he would be in first grade. He has twenty-two classmates, ranging in age from six to nine. They are roughly distributed across first, second and third grade, but because children work at their own pace, there is considerable variation as to who is in what group for math, language, science, and social studies lessons.

Justin's early-childhood teachers expressed concern that he was neither able to build three- and four-letter phonetic words nor able to recognize any sight words at the end of his kindergarten year. They suggested comprehensive academic testing, to which his parents agreed. Results suggest Justin may have a reading disability, although his math skills are higher than those of other children his age.

Justin has already decided he does not like working with the Language materials. He complains about composing words with the Moveable Alphabet (cut-out letters) and consistently runs out of time to read word

and phrase cards. His teachers know he loves soccer and enjoys preparing food. They create a series of matching words and pictures around these two interests, help him write a survey he conducts among his classmates about soccer, and guide him in creating a collage depicting the steps to making a pizza. They also encourage his parents to continue periodic testing and to begin considering tutoring services. They all agree that *now* is the time to build Justin's self confidence by building his math strengths rather than over-emphasizing "catch-up" work in language.

Sarah

Sarah is four years old. She smiles often, loves play dough, enjoys books and puzzles, and likes to run on the playground. She does not use speech

to communicate, and she is learning sign language with her parents. She has Downs Syndrome and works with both occupational and speech therapists. Her Montessori teachers have learned simple signs for feelings, objects, and activities in the classroom. They ask Sarah if she is happy or sad today; remind her to hang up her coat; and give her lessons about colors, numbers, mammals, and *sink* vs. using gestures, a few signs and lots of facial expression. Sarah's classmates enjoy giving her lessons on pouring, scooping and washing sea shells. They learn to be patient when she spills rice or drips water, reminding her to clean up spills.

Frustrations occur when Sarah is not able to clearly communicate what she wants or needs, despite the community's willingness to use sign language. Her teachers, parents, and therapists continually review all available learning options, from adapting lessons in the Montessori school to visiting classrooms in the public school system. Even though most days go fairly well, they realize a time may come when Sarah's needs will be better met in another educational setting.



Sam

Sam is ten years old and likes exploring chemical reactions. He has cerebral palsy and uses a motorized wheel chair to navigate the various curriculum areas in his classroom. He works hard to communicate clearly, and his class-

mates can usually understand his speech. He uses a keyboard attached to his wheel chair tray to slowly type words and phrases when people cannot understand his speech. Sam is also gifted and attends a science enrichment class at the university in his town. His mother and father have both modified their career plans to provide more time to transport Sam to his therapies and classes.

Although Sam excels academically, he struggles to make friends. He had playmates when he was a preschooler, but as he grew older his peers began to play without him. Although they were polite, they did not know how to adapt activities so he could participate. As the years went by, they felt badly (even guilty) that Sam was usually on the perimeter of the playground and not invited to birthdays and overnights. Now Sam often feels left out and lonely; his teachers and parents worry that he may become depressed.

His physical therapist is urging them to implement a program called "Circle of Friends" that would provide a structure for Sam to experience a more fulfilled social life. They are hopeful the program may benefit not only Sam, but his classmates as well. Sam's classmates know that Sam has a "whacky" sense of humor. They most certainly want him to feel happier and be part of the class community. They need help learning how to be his friend.

Shana

Shana's Mom felt lucky to find a Montessori school that agreed to accept her daughter. She shared reports from Shana's previous school stating that although she was usually attentive and respectful, her behavior required constant management. She was taking medication to control her hyperactivity. Having just turned six, she was beginning to learn how to recognize upsetting situations and ask for

help instead of yelling or pushing. Her Montessori teachers were willing to help her make charts and record her own behaviors.

She stayed focused during the morning circle time and did OK during the morning work period, except when she pushed three-year-old Jake to get to the snack table. She was proud that she asked permission to leave the group lesson on China after trying her best to listen without tickling and wrestling with Lana, who was sitting next to her. She knew it would disturb Lana and the other children and that she could have a lesson from one of her classmates later in the afternoon.

Shana's teachers work with a behavior specialist to learn self-management strategies. Already keen observers, they continually catch Shana "being good," so they know that she is thor-

oughly aware of her own appropriate behaviors. They watch for early signs of inattentive or disrespectful behaviors and teach Shana how to spot these "red flags" herself. Not all days go well, particularly when the class routine changes for a visitor or special celebration. Shana's teachers are concerned that they are spending much more time with Shana than the other children in the class. They have shared this concern with Shana's Mom.

All are hopeful that Shana will continue to learn to manage her own behavior. They are mindful that a change might be needed if Shana continues to require more assistance than her teachers can offer. But they are all impressed and sometimes downright inspired with how quickly Shana has learned to say, "I need to go listen to a book on tape" instead of disrupting a group lesson. They

want Shana to succeed in her new Montessori school setting.

"Welcome to Holland"

Montessori is not the answer for all children with exceptionalities. Justin, Sarah, Sam, and Shana have wonderful days and not so wonderful days in their classrooms. Their parents and teachers work hard to understand their strengths and their needs, and to adapt the curriculum to create the best fit possible. They recognize the potential Montessori has for children with exceptionalities and are committed to creating positive, even terrific experiences for each of the children. And they are aware of the constant need to communicate honestly: what is going well, what is not going well, what can we do differently, and is this the best environment for this child at this time?

Welcome to Holland

I am often asked to describe the experience of raising a child with a disability – to try to help people who have not shared that unique experience, to understand it, to imagine how it would feel. It's like this ...

When you are going to have a baby, it's like planning a fabulous vacation trip – to Italy. You buy a bunch of guidebooks and make your wonderful plans. The Coliseum. Michelangelo's David. The gondolas of Venice. You may even learn some handy new phrases in Italian. It's all very exciting.

After months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and off you go. Several hours later the plane lands. The attendant comes in and says, "Welcome to Holland."

Holland? Did you say Holland?! What do you mean Holland? I signed up for Italy! All my life I've dreamed of going to Italy!

But there's been a change in the flight plan. They have landed in Holland and there you must stay.

The important thing is that they haven't taken you to a horrible, disgusting place full of pestilence, famine and disease. It's just a different place.

So, you must go out and buy new guidebooks, and you must learn a whole new language. And you will meet a whole new group of people you never would have met.

It's just a different place. It's slower paced than Italy, less flashy than Italy. But after you have been there for a while and you catch your breath, you look around and you begin to notice

that Holland has tulips. Holland even has Rembrandts.

But everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy, and they're all bragging and for the rest of your life you will say, "Yes, that's where I was supposed to go. That's what I had planned."

And the pain of that will never, ever, ever go away, because the loss of that dream is a very significant loss. But if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn't get to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things about Holland.



In the seventies, when the Netherlands was still commonly called Holland, Abigail Van Buren published a letter in her advice column ("Dear Abby"). The article has been republished over and over, and is often shared in "Introduction to Exceptional Learners" college classes. The article was written by the parent of a child with exceptionalities (name unknown). Despite dated language and some oversimplification, it portrays both the heartache and the joy of being the parent of a child with special needs. It provides a clear message for parents and teachers as they embrace the challenge of creating a learning experience for children with exceptionalities in Montessori environments.

For many families of children with exceptionalities, Montessori does bring a touch of Italy to the beauty of their Holland experience.

Resources

Both the federal government and private organizations offer resources for parents. University special education programs and community-based support groups also provide invaluable source of timely information.

Council for American Private Education:

cape@capenet.org, 301-916-8460 (Contact for IEAA Tool Kit)

IDEA Local Implementation by Local Administrators

Partnership (ILIAD): www.ideapractices.org;

(877) CEC-IDEA (toll free)

Council for Exceptional Children:

Discover IDEA 2002 with enhanced search opportunities:

1-800-224-6830; www.cec.sped.org

Office of Non-Public Education:

nonpubliceducation@ed.gov, 202-401-1365;

<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OHIA/NonPublic/federal/idea.html>

Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP):

www.ed.gov/offices/osers/osep; (202-205-9754)

Free and Appropriate Education: www.fape.org

Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center:

email: partners@peatc.org; 703-923-0010

Learning Disabilities Association of America:

www.ldanatl.org; 414-341-1515

Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder:

www.chadd.org; 1-800-233-4050

American Association on Mental Retardation:

www.aamr.org; 202-387-1968

Autism Association of America: www.autism-society.org;

301-651-0881; 1-800-3autism



