

# **Creating a Community Classroom: Strategies to Promote Inclusion and Reduce Bullying in Early Childhood**

**Julie C. Parker**

*Mississippi State University*

**Angel Herring**

**Jeffrey Leffler**

*The University of Southern Mississippi*

**Cappe Hallberg**

*Mississippi State University*

*Research suggests that young children with disabilities often fall victim to bullying because of a lack of social competence and social skills necessary for consistent engagement with peers. This article focuses on a comprehensive approach to classroom management and offers important strategies for a multi-level positive behavioral support plan. The positive behavioral support plan is embedded in the daily curriculum and includes strategies that enhance cooperative learning and socialization experiences, increases academic readiness, and supports academic success.*

**Keywords:** inclusion, classroom community, anti-bullying, behavior support plan

Peer rejection is an eventual reality for many young children. For children with special needs, however, the incident rate is comparatively high, with some research suggesting that children with special needs experience a peer rejection rate of 33%, while their typically developing peers experience a much lower 10% rate of peer rejection (Odom, Brown, Schwartz, Zercher, & Sandall, 2002). Research suggests that young children with disabilities often fall victim to bullying because of the lack of social competence and social skills necessary for consistent engagement with peers (Heydenberk & Heydenberk, 2007). Victims of bullying, often children with disabilities, are usually identified as demonstrating low levels of social competence, inefficient conflict resolution skills, and lower levels of effective vocabulary (Heydenberk & Heydenberk, 2007; Samples, 2004). Further, young children who are bullied in the preschool or primary years are more likely to continue to be bullied as they reach middle and high school (Brown & Taylor, 2008).

In an effort to include all children in appropriate educational settings, inclusive classrooms are becoming more evident in the preschool and primary years. While evidence supports the

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Direct correspondence to Julie C. Parker at [jparker@humansci.msstate.edu](mailto:jparker@humansci.msstate.edu)

concept of inclusion of children with and without disabilities in the same classroom, the process of establishing a community learning environment can be challenging for early childhood educators (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Terpstra & Tamura, 2008; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Stoolmiller, 2008). The relevance of positive peer relationships and classroom management strategies are particularly evident in the inclusive early childhood setting. Specific developmental skills and relationship components have been identified, however, as particularly important for establishing a nurturing and supportive environment for all children: emotional self-regulation, social competence (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Terpstra & Tamura, 2008), encouraging classroom communities (Gartrell, 2007), and social skills curriculum (Allen & Cowdery, 2005; Webster-Stratton et al., 2008).

Emotional development and emotional regulation are identified as the foundations to a young child's well-being, with specific emphasis on emotional regulation and educational growth and development (Lillas & Turnbull, 2009). The ability to demonstrate appropriate emotional regulation and pro-social skills can assist young children in developing friendships, being successful as play partners, learning the importance of cooperation (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Terpstra & Tamura, 2008) and developing the capacity for empathy (Gartrell, 2007). However, emotion regulation and pro-social behaviors do not naturally occur or unfold as development progresses. Rather, the ability to regulate behavior and initiate pro-social interactions are skills that are acquired or learned within the context of relationships and environments that promote the importance of quality social experiences (Kim, 2005; Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Terpstra & Tamura, 2008; Webster-Stratton et al., 2008). Young children with disabilities often demonstrate lower levels of these key components of social competence, leading to lower social status within the classroom (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008). Thus, it is important for early childhood educators to assist young children, with and without disabilities, in increasing emotional regulation and building social skills as we move toward a more inclusive mindset in our early childhood settings (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Terpstra & Tamura, 2008; Webster-Stratton et al., 2008).

A growing body of literature is emerging that supports the need to establish strong foundations in social competence for all young children (Niles, Reynolds, & Roe-Sepowitz, 2008; Webster-Stratton et al., 2008). All young children in early childhood classrooms can benefit from curriculum and interactive relationships that promote respect and responsible behavior (Heydenberk & Heydenberk, 2007; Terpstra & Tamura, 2008). When self-regulation skills are facilitated, a sense of psychological safety permeates the classroom and sets the stage for social success for all children (Bailey, 2011). Early childhood educators who teach young children with disabilities are particularly charged with the responsibility of designing environments that support interactive play, nurture early friendships, and reduce rejection and isolation, as the rates of peer rejection and isolation for young children with disabilities are estimated to be disproportionately higher than for their typically developing peers (Kim, 2005; Odom et al.,

2002; Terpstra & Tamura, 2008). When young children with disabilities can engage with peers and be engaged by peers without disabilities it creates a “framework for mutual interest and shared understanding” (Kim, 2005, p.166) that promotes meaningful play and social experiences and facilitates opportunities for incidents of social competence to emerge across developmental levels for all involved, creating a classroom climate that becomes influential in peer acceptance and supportive of accommodations of children with disabilities (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012).

A comprehensive approach to classroom management must target these important skills and be designed to offer support for children at multiple levels (Hirschstein, Edstrom, Frey, Snell, & MacKenzie, 2007; Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008). Strategies for classroom management must focus on creating connections and a sense of safety for all children and be framed with a multi-level approach to addressing challenging behavior, especially bullying.

### **Positive Behavioral Support Plan**

A classroom-wide positive behavioral support plan is a multi-level approach that is evidence-based and especially addresses the need to provide meaningful, hands-on interventions in an inclusive classroom community (Heydenberk & Heydenberk, 2007). Classroom positive behavioral support plans create environments that support social and learning outcomes while preventing problem behaviors (Trussell, 2008). For example, when teachers have and encourage positive relationships with and among children, strive to foster supportive classroom environments, and focus on teaching social and communication skills, they reduce the likelihood of challenging behavior.

#### **Level I**

In level one of the positive behavioral support plan, strategies are geared toward the classroom as a whole. These strategies offer all members of the class daily opportunities to participate and be engaged in problem solving, negotiations, and positive interactions.

**Classroom meetings.** Classroom meetings are held to develop the classroom as a community that accepts and celebrates human differences and acknowledges strengths in all the members (Gartrell, 2007; Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008). They provide every student in the class a chance to have his/her voice be recognized and heard, acknowledging that every child holds an important and valued place in the classroom.

Classroom meetings offer all class members opportunities to discuss current problems, brainstorm about solutions, and implement a solution that is agreed on by the majority of the class (Jones & Jones, 2004; Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008). The classroom meetings should foster a sense of belonging for each child and be framed with guidelines to provide structure and

fairness for all. Logistically, meetings should occur in a circle, ensuring that everyone can see and be seen; and their purpose should be a time when the class can unite, share, celebrate, create, and/or problem solve, reinforcing the idea that all are valued and part of the functioning whole of the classroom (Bailey, 2011).

Children with disabilities report that hiding their condition often results in increased rates of social exclusion and bullying, making them targets for children to point out their differences in hurtful ways (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012). When a child with a disability joins a class, the classroom meeting could afford the child, as able, the opportunity to share about his/her disability and inform the class what his/her related needs are, while also emphasizing the similarities shared with classmates. In the event the child is too young or physically unable to do so for him/herself, the teacher could lead this discussion. Open disclosure of the disability can create a better understanding of both differences and similarities and drastically reduce any bullying stemming from ignorance or misunderstandings of the disability (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012).

**Conflict resolution circle.** Conflict resolution circles are used to mediate disputes between two children. A conflict resolution circle is a plastic ring that serves as a physical reinforcer for conflict resolution (Heydenberk & Heydenberk, 2007). The conflict resolution circle is placed in a central location in the classroom. When a conflict arises, the disputants are taught to hold the ring together, while facing each other and state their version of the problem without interrupting each other. The conflict resolution ring allows each disputant to clarify his or her perspective, paraphrase his or her understanding of the other person's perspective, and work collaboratively to reach a solution (Heydenberk & Heydenberk, 2007). For young children, the conflict resolution ring offers a tangible reminder that discussions can assist in resolving conflicts in appropriate ways and reinforce that everyone's perspective is important. Further, the act of holding the ring together provides an important physical connection for the children as they navigate their conflict discussion.

**Peaceful beings.** Young children often need visible reminders of the importance of being kind and peaceful. The Peaceful Beings, life-size paper-doll figures, are inscribed with words that the children generate alternatives to name calling and insults (Heydenberk & Heydenberk, 2007). After the Peaceful Beings are fully inscribed with words such as kindness, caring, helpfulness, sharing, listening, etc., the Peaceful Beings are hung on the wall to serve as physical reminders to use kind words that are helpful and not harmful to others (Heydenberk & Heydenberk, 2007).

## Level II

The second level of the positive behavioral support plan is designed to address specific strategies that promote social competence and social skills. Children without disabilities can effectively

employ social skill strategies that increase their social interactions with peers with disabilities (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Terpstra & Tamura, 2008). When young children without disabilities better understand and appreciate the actions and behaviors, or the lack thereof, from their peers with disabilities, they are more inclined to view the peer with a disability as a competent play partner. Strategies that assist the young child without disabilities include increasing skill in mutual attention to the play activity, offering comments about current activities, suggesting play ideas, and being affectionate (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Terpstra & Tamura, 2008).

**Children's literature.** Early childhood educators should design a step-by-step process to assist children to employ social skills while engaging with their peers with disabilities. The step-by-step process should include an introduction to the skill, discussion about why the skill is important, adult modeling of the skill, adult-child practice of the skill, and finally, child-child practice of the skill (Terpstra & Tamura, 2008). Children's literature is a good anchor for the facilitation of the step-by-step process. For instance, in the board book, *Let's Be Friends*, Hallinan (2005) teaches children that the first step in establishing a new friendship can be as simple as a smile and a greeting. In *I Want to Play*, Crary (1996) allows her young readers to consider ways to best initiate play with others. And books such as *Yo! Yes?* reminds all children that getting to know people who are different can result in unexpected friendships (Raschka, 1993).

**Placemat game.** The placemat game pairs children with a disability with a typically developing peer and is used during snack and meal times, thus increasing the social experience of said times for the child with a disability. The teacher provides both children a placemat during snack or meal time. The placemats should include pictures that are familiar and likely to prompt conversation. Recommended pictures include: activities that the children experience in the classroom, familiar characters, or favorite toys or foods. The children are then prompted to begin a discussion about the pictures. Drawing the attention of both children to a common interest increases social interaction during a mealtime experience and provides a more positive social experience for all children (Terpstra & Tamura, 2008). When children identify that they share common interests and or goals, social interactions increase and more social play and engagement occur across developmental levels and classroom activities (Kim, 2005).

### Level III

Level three is designed to target individual strategies for the child with a disability or with weak social competence. A child with a disability may not acquire social skills as easily as a child without a disability, often requiring more direct instruction and social skills training (Allen & Cowdery, 2005; Terpstra & Tamura, 2008). Social skills training activities should be designed to target the child's specific needs (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008). Young children with

disabilities often need assistance and training to acquire or enhance skills that include opportunities to learn how to enter playgroups, how to share, how to initiate interactions, and how to respond appropriately (Terpstra & Tamura, 2008). These skills are most effective when taught in the natural environment of the classroom, embedded in the course of daily activities. Young children with disabilities can be taught how to imitate their peers and engage with toys and others in curriculum centers in inviting ways (Allen & Cowdery, 2005; Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008).

**Class leaders.** An example that assists young children with disabilities in developing social competence and social skills includes providing them an opportunity to serve as a leader in the class. Young children with disabilities need opportunities to experience leadership. An example for increasing leadership with young children may include providing a child with wheelchair mobility a small basket to use to pass out napkins and cups for snack. Young children with language delays or impairment may find a welcome announcement recorded on his or her augmentative communication device useful. This announcement allows the child to be the early morning door greeter as his or her peers arrive at school.

**Teacher prompts and cues.** Another example of Level III strategies is the teacher's use of prompts or cues to elicit more social interactions and provide daily opportunities to engage in developmentally appropriate play (Kim, 2005; Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Terpstra & Tamura, 2008). The teacher can provide more social prompts and more structured support to assist the child in engaging in new activities or playing with new toys. Examples may include direct hand-over-hand activities or reminding the child how to use play-group entry skills (e.g., "Ask your friend to help you balance your block on the tower you're building").

## Summary

The strategies included in this positive behavioral support plan are based on evidence that demonstrates effective approaches to reducing challenging behaviors, increasing social competence, and establishing a community classroom climate. It is important for an early childhood teacher to develop a classroom management plan that includes numerous positive behavioral management strategies that promote the social and emotional well-being of all children (Webster-Stratton et al., 2008). When the daily curriculum frames the important social skills needed and includes strategies that enhance cooperative learning and socialization experiences, young children with and without disabilities gain skills and perspectives that result in fewer conduct problems, increased academic readiness, and more academic success (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Terpstra & Tamura, 2008; Webster-Stratton et al., 2008).

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*Julie Parker*, Ph.D., CCLS, is an Assistant Professor in the School of Human Sciences at Mississippi State University. One of her research interests is inclusive programming.

*Angel Herring*, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Child and Family Studies at The University of Southern Mississippi. Her research interests are emotional and social foundations in early childhood.

*Jeffrey Leffler*, Ed.S., is the Executive Director of the Center for Child Development within Department of Child and Family Studies at The University of Southern Mississippi. His research interest is in leadership.

*Cappe Hallberg*, B.S., is a graduate assistant in the School of Human Sciences at Mississippi State University and has a research interest in working with children and families.