SUMMARY OF CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

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THE FIRST EIGHT YEARS
PATHWAYS TO THE FUTURE

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

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Characteristics of Effective Peer Models in an Integrated Preschool Setting

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IDEA legislation encourages provision of early childhood special education services in settings that integrate children who have disabilities with peers who are developing typically. Yet, there is little information on the traits that nondisabled children need to manifest to be considered competent peer models. There is no published protocol for identifying a capable peer model. Given so little data, might educators and policy makers be left to assume that any child who is nondisabled will be a capable peer model? This may be a less than adequate determination.

To attempt to answer the question of how to identify a capable peer model, an integrated preschool program reviewed the behaviors of peer models. Visoky and Poe (2000) provided an observation of models' interactional behaviors. To expand upon these data, the present study used:

1. Observations of 20 models' behaviors in class during 30-minute cycles over 7 months using 2-minute interval continuous sampling. Notes on behaviors (language, play, prosocial, modeling) were charted on a 50-item coding sheet.
2. Two informal sociometric measures, completed by each child, intended to reveal their peer preferences.
3. Teacher questionnaires.

Over 10,000 minutes of observations of play, social, and language behaviors documented what peer models did on a daily basis. Models played parallel with special needs peers, but also sought these peers as associative playmates, organized play routines that involved special needs peers, and engaged in conversation with them about topics in the here-and-now and related to imaginative play. When play was cooperative, the typically developing children sought one another out. The most frequently occurring behaviors were solo play, seeking an adult, listening to adult input, responding to an adult, conversation leader, merriment (silly songs, joking), seeking a peer to play or talk with, organizing play, waiting, and playing collaboratively. Models did little coaching of special needs peers; they assisted them with dressing, hand washing, and manipulating objects at teachers' requests.

Models provided excellent language models during group activities. The special needs children were keenly observing and shadowing their regular education peers. They seemed to sense that they could take language and behavioral cues from these children more than they could from their special needs peers. If these able peers were not present, the special needs children would have fewer models to observe.

Sociometric measures revealed that when the peer models self-nominated three children with whom they play the most, 31/60 nominations were for special needs children. When peer

models self-nominated three children they like best, 27/60 nominations were for children with special needs. The two measures were in agreement 92.5% of the time (same children named twice). Teachers named children who peer models play with and their nominations agreed with children's nominations 60% of the time. When teachers were asked, "Whom does the peer help the most?" 39/40 nominations were for special needs children. When children were asked, "Who needs help?" 16/20 nominated special needs children. When children were asked, "Who is a good helper?" 16/20 nominated a peer model.

Reference

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