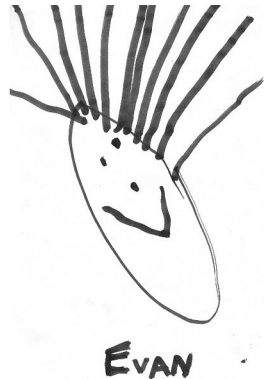


Full Inclusion - A Teacher's Perspective



Over the past five years, the parents of ten children with whom BIA works have attended the Peninsula Jewish Community Center (PJCC—<http://www.pjcc.org>) in Foster City, looking for a quality early education program open to the accommodations necessary for their child with ASD. Earlier this month, I interviewed preschool teacher Renee Sims who had Sarah, a BIA client, in her class this year. Renee has nineteen years of experience teaching preschool; the last nine years with the PJCC. I was curious to know how Renee felt about her year with Sarah, what she thought Sarah learned from being in her class and what her class gained by having Sarah in it.—**Michael Pointer Mace**

MPM: Can you describe some of the progress Sarah has made in the past school year?

RS: In the beginning, Sarah's aide was acting as her eyes, pointing Sarah towards me so she would pay attention, helping her to clap at circle time, to do the hand motions, all of that. Now Sarah knows how to participate in circle, whether she is watching one of the other children, or me, she knows what to do. With Sarah it was more of a challenge for her than the other children but she has really jumped some hurdles. The consistency was hard at first, she wanted to do other things, she wanted to run, she wanted to move every which way, and Sung Ae (BIA senior tutor and aide) had to pull her back to the group.

MPM: What do you think helped Sarah learn to stay with the group?

RS: The visual schedule really helped Sarah at the beginning because, I don't think she could follow the

verbal directions, there was too much going on and you could tell that she was just looking, trying to figure out what to do. Sung Ae would take a picture of what we were going to do next or where we were going next and show it to her and she would take that picture and walk it over. Sometimes it

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depended on what the project was or what we were doing but she would go right over. If it was something she didn't like she needed help with the transition.

MPM: Did the visual schedule make her more independent?

RS: Definitely, because it was something that she could do on her own. When she learned where every picture was, she'd walk right over to it, so it created a sense of independence for her. And she's not using her schedule any more—she knows when circle time is, or outside time or Mr. Barry (gym class) – she goes right there on her own now. She's also paying more attention to the other children now.

MPM: What else has she learned this year?

RS: She's mimicking now, she's actually hearing words. That helps her know what to do.

MPM: What do you think Sarah has learned from her classmates?

RS: By following the other children, whether it is going out to the playground, playing with the sand or going up the slide, she watches and she'll go up the slide too. Or if she sees a child in the kitchen corner – which is now her favorite thing to do – she's starting to want what the other kids have, which she didn't do before. In the beginning it was

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as if she didn't even see the other children.

MPM: *So now she's paying more attention to her classmates?*

RS: She is definitely interested and playing more. There are certain children in the classroom who are very verbal and Sung Ae and I bring those children in to work with Sarah, play tea party or kitchen. I think it helps her tremendously when the children are talking back and forth and role playing with her. She's learning that a truck makes this sound, an airplane goes "zoom", from watching the other children do it. As a teacher you can see that they really do learn from each other.

MPM: *Tell me about diversity in your classroom.*

RS: Sitting in Foster City, the PJCC gets a lot of different kinds of kids, a lot of different nationalities. We have a wonderful school and we are open to taking all children regardless of race, language, or religion. I think we are seeing a lot more children with disabilities that need a good preschool; I think you are seeing all preschools realizing that we have to be more open to all children.

MPM: *Sarah's parents have had a relatively easy time setting up playdates with her classmates. Why do you think that is?*

RS: Parents who come to the PJCC know that we have a very diverse group of children. But I

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think it's also the parents being open to Sarah, as well as her mom. It's interesting – I think it makes it a lot easier when a parent can be very open about their child's disability. That's how you will get the help your child needs, letting other parents know: this is my child, this is where she is, and [she needs to be] part of the group.

MPM: *Do you think the other children have benefited by having Sarah in their class?*

RS: The benefit is that your child is being exposed to what the world is really like; we are not all the same. We all learn differently, we all look differently, and I think these days you have a roomful of 12 children that come from every walk of life; it makes the children more open to the world around them.

MPM: *Has the word "autism" changed for you?*

RS: I think so, I definitely think so, because I think what we see about autism on T.V. is definitely wrong. I think we are learning that children with autism can learn just like any other child, it just takes more work.

