

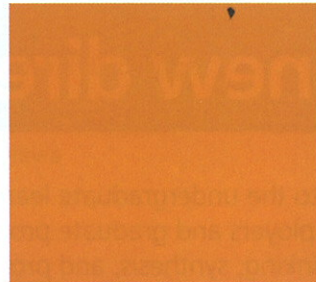
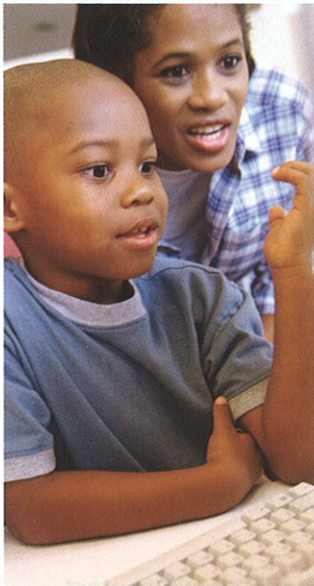
Summer 2011

Connections

Creating Community Partnerships



Building Collaborations for Early Success p. 10



A Thriving Future: Community Collaborative Model in Santa Barbara County p. 16

When Something Isn't Right in School: Early Intervention to Get Young Learners Back on Track



Aidan, a cheerful, spunky five-year-old boy, loves going to kindergarten. He has many friends and enjoys his playtime out in the yard on the climbing structure. Inside the classroom, however, he has trouble sitting quietly during “circle time.” When his teacher reads a book to the class, she constantly has to stop and ask Aidan to keep his hands to himself as he is prone to touching, poking and bothering the child next to him. He can't sit through circle time activities without being removed. He's also not making progress with reading. He's driven to distraction even in small group instruction. His teacher is not sure if the problem is a behavior or learning issue. What she does know is that Aidan has missed many learning opportunities.



Olivia is a polite and kind six-year-old girl. She is quiet and introverted, thoughtful and creative and has always enjoyed going to school. Suddenly, though, her parents have noticed her becoming more disengaged. She doesn't want to go to school and complains of tummy-aches. She often sits by herself at snack and lunch time. Coincidentally, her teacher has noticed that Olivia is having trouble with her reading. One day she'll know exactly the sound a “t” makes, and the next day she's completely forgotten. She is not retaining information from day to day, nor is she making the same progress as her peers.



Andre is a dynamic, creative and energetic second grader who is smart and funny and spirited in every way. From the outside, it would seem that Andre would have no trouble making friends. But recently, his outgoing and assertive demeanor has started to rub kids the wrong way. When he wants to join in on a game of tetherball, for instance, he grabs the ball and holds it away from the kids, stopping the game. He is desperate to join in, but can't find a way to do it that doesn't get on everyone's nerves. Kids at school intentionally leave him out of games because they know he incites negativity. Lately, teachers are putting him in time-out more frequently for his problematic behavior. Andre's parents have voiced concern to his teacher about his exclusion from playground games and his frequent punishment. He has started telling them he hates school and wants to be alone.

Aidan, Olivia and Andre are examples of children you might recognize. They are children who are showing emerging signs of difficulty in school. Parents and teachers may be aware that a child is going through a rough patch, but may be uncertain about the scope of the problem and its cause. What is the best way to help young learners like Aidan, Olivia and Andre?

Evidence suggests that early intervention is the most effective way to make life easier for a child who is struggling, his family and his teachers; yet many parents opt for a wait-and-see approach, hoping their child will outgrow the problem. Parents are often hesitant to accept that their child is developing “differently” from other children and want their child to be treated as any other typically developing child would be. As a result, they will often keep their child in the same learning environment, not seek help and hope that the next year with a different teacher will make the difference. But in fact, the opposite can happen. The longer the child is delayed from getting the intervention he needs, the more difficult it can

become for him to overcome his challenges. Additionally, early intervention is crucial to avoid adversely affecting a child's self-esteem. When a child sees his classmates experiencing success much more easily, behavior difficulties can start to arise. Even if the child has the intelligence and ability to succeed in school, he often doesn't feel smart and can begin to act out, shut down or withdraw.

The research on early intervention programs shows faster progress and success by starting as early as possible. In one study, for example, providing early intervention for skill deficits in grades K-1 built skills four times faster than addressing the same problems in fourth grade or later.* The fact is—early intervention is key. If you intervene early, the intervention is likely to be **shorter and less intense** than if you wait to intervene until third or fourth grade. Parents can alleviate years of frustration for the child and the family by seeking help early. With support, the child can build foundational skills he will use throughout school. Typically, parents postpone acting until they see the full impact of their child's problems in third or fourth grade when the work load increases, materials become more abstract and reading skills are expected to be in place. By this time, the child has already lost foundational years of education. For children like these there haven't been a lot of in-school options as alternatives to the wait-and-see approach.

For children like Aidan, Olivia and Andre, the first step is recognizing that the child isn't developing or behaving in the same way as his peers. Whether it's a child's reading delays, behavior issues or a parent's anxiety that their child is being excluded and shutting down—when a behavior has changed dramatically enough to indicate something may be wrong, that's the time to encourage parents to seek help. Other times when intervening should be considered:

- A problem behavior is occurring over and over again.
- There's a developmentally appropriate activity the child should be able to do, but cannot, e.g., sit quietly during circle time and wait his turn to answer.
- The child spends most of his time alone and doesn't appear to have friends.
- The child has a lack of interest in reading and avoids reading aloud.

This is tricky territory, as children may display varying degrees of traits that are part of their personalities. A seasoned teacher can help sort out what is typical and what needs more attention. Jennifer Winters, Director of The Bing Nursery School in Palo Alto, California, comments, “It is critical for teachers to have a good sense of what child development looks like, to know what the ranges are and to know when to raise an orange flag.” When in doubt, teachers should encourage parents to seek help from other professionals (e.g., psychologist, speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist or pediatrician). The more that parents and teachers can get coaching and collaborate with specialists, the better able they will be to find strategies to help the child.

In large classrooms, these children's behaviors may not be severe enough to raise a flag that they need specialized support, especially when they are one of 20 kids in a classroom. While many children with mild to moderate issues would not do well being placed in a typical special needs classroom, they would benefit immensely from early intervention. Teachers and parents don't need to wait for a formal diagnosis before taking action.

Keep in mind that the child's current learning environment may not be the right fit for him. As an educator, it's important to remember that children who don't appear to be a good fit for your classroom may have challenges that aren't immediately apparent. For example, a child like Aidan with attention issues is capable of learning but is at risk for inappropriately being labeled a "trouble maker." He simply needs the right support, potentially from a specialist, to build skills and learn strategies to cope effectively with his challenges, without damaging his motivation to learn.

Children who are bright but struggling with some combination of behavior, social and/or learning issues need to learn how to handle not only academics, but also issues not typically addressed in a mainstream school setting—social and emotional skills, impulse control and learning differences. These are the types of issues that professionals are trained to address skillfully and sensitively. Even if parents resist the idea that their child needs more help than others, assure them that you see their child's potential and know he is bright and capable. Convey your concern that without attention, his struggles may overshadow his potential. Finally, remind them that a little extra support now can eliminate years of struggle later.

Encouraging parents to act now to relax later gives your student the best chance to learn skills to overcome his problems. With early support from teachers and other professionals, children like Aidan, Olivia and Andre have the chance to fit in, feel successful and reach their full potential.

*National Institutes of Health

Rosalie Whitlock, Ph.D., is an educational specialist, the executive director at Children's Health Council and cofounder of Sand Hill School, an early intervention primary school. Dr. Whitlock started her career as a teacher and is the former head of school at Charles Armstrong School, a primary and middle school for children with language-based learning differences.



CAEYC is now on

You Tube

Broadcast Yourself™

We will be sharing lots of great information, so use your smartphone to scan this QR code or visit

www.youtube.com/califaeyc

Bookmark the site on your web browser and visit often.



TRY THIS

While it's not usually possible for an educator in a large classroom to give each student the individualized attention he needs, instructional methods that help struggling students are also effective for all students. Try integrating more of these elements into your teaching:

1. Use a multi-sensory approach.

Kids learn and retain information best when they're using multiple senses. For instance, try appealing to their tactile, visual and auditory senses by turning a lesson about addition and subtraction into a game of bowling. Each child should begin by writing the total number of pins standing. Have a few volunteers take turns knocking down pins and ask everyone to write down the number of pins on the ground. After each turn, students should subtract the number of pins on the ground from the original total of pins. By writing, watching and counting pins, students have a better grasp of what subtraction is and how it works.

2. Be repetitive.

Children need to hear the same lessons often before they can absorb what they've heard. Reinforce learning by referring to lessons they have already had. After a lesson about the sound the letter "t" makes, find opportunities throughout the following days and weeks to remind kids what that sound is and what it looks like in print. For example: "Today we're reading *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Can someone point out the letter 't' in the title and tell me what sound it's making?"

3. Build a systematic and sequential routine.

Post a daily schedule so children know what to expect throughout the day and are prepared to transition from one activity to the next. Sudden transitions can be jarring so offer warnings before switching between tasks. Creating a predictable, safe environment for students increases their level of comfort in the classroom. When they're comfortable, they're at an optimal level for focusing on the task at hand. In the morning, ask them to do the same things every day, e.g. hang their coat, put their lunches away, then sit down and show you they are ready for circle time.

4. Offer structured, direct and explicit instructions with regular checks for understanding.

Don't assume that your students know how to be students. They need to learn strategies and tools that they might not intuitively pick up in order to be successful. For instance, while your students might copy down an assignment and take home their homework planner, they may not remember to bring home the materials they need to complete the assignment. Give them a reminder at the end of the day about what they'll need to take home in order to do their homework.