

Intellectual Disability: Helping Handout for School

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INTRODUCTION

The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD, 2012) defines intellectual disability (ID) as a developmental disorder that emerges prior to age 18 and is characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and independent performance of daily activities, or adaptive behavior. Clinically, ID often is defined by the severity of the student's limitations (e.g., mild, moderate, or severe). However, this approach focuses on the student's inherent, and presumably unchangeable, deficits. A more beneficial approach is to consider the level of support that is necessary to achieve academic, behavioral, and social goals. In this way, the effects of the disability are viewed as features that will vary and can be increased (or decreased) by instruction.

Within the school context, students with ID should be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE) alongside peers to the greatest degree possible (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). Students with ID who receive an individualized education within the general classroom setting not only are afforded access to the core academic curriculum, but also learn to model their behavior after that expected of same-age peers without disabilities. As a result, students with ID demonstrate enhanced academic, behavioral, communication, and social skills (Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Boviard, 2007). Depending on the level of support necessary, educational teams need to provide additional supplementary aids and services to the student with ID. These may include specifically designed instruction, access to specialized support staff (e.g., behavioral specialist), equipment (e.g., assistive technology), and other accommodations to

provide meaningful educational benefits in the general education classroom.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN PLANNING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

Regardless of their level of ability, many students with ID find it difficult to engage in classroom instruction (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2009). They also may have difficulties with working memory, which will prevent them from remembering information required for an immediate request or task (Lifshitz, Kilberg, & Vakil, 2016). Moreover, the majority of students with ID will exhibit some form of receptive and expressive communication delays. About 60% of students with ID communicate through symbolic methods (e.g., sign, pictures), although they understand spoken language (Barron & Winn, 2009).

Difficulties exhibited by students with ID may range from mild to profoundly impaired. However, these students benefit from many of the same accommodations and supports that are used to teach individuals with other learning challenges, including learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and autism spectrum disorder. Like other students with disabilities, students with ID often need the following:

- Extra time to complete assignments/tests
- Repetition
- Instruction provided within small groups or with a partner
- Materials to help guide comprehension (i.e., guided notes)
- Instruction that is broken down into small steps
- Alternative mechanisms for responding (e.g., electronic device)

- More frequent explicit feedback
- Explicit instruction in organization.

The framework of positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS; www.pbis.org) is helpful when planning educational supports for students with ID. PBIS provides a broad range of proactive, systematic, and individualized strategies for achieving important social and learning outcomes in safe and effective environments while preventing problem behavior (Sugai et al., 2000). The framework is based on the guiding tenets of prevention, evidence-based practice, and systematic implementation. For students with ID, a large focus of educational planning should center on modifications of the learning environment to prevent challenging behaviors, ensure safety, teach new skills, and reinforce positive behaviors (Jolivette, McDaniel, Sprague, Swain-Bradway, & Ennis, 2013).

Although formal special education services likely will be a component of educating students with ID, schools should use person-centered planning as a vehicle to promote meaningful inclusion. Person-centered planning is an individualized process designed to respond to the preferences and long-term goals of the student. The overall purpose is to identify a future vision for the student and provide the necessary supports to achieve what the student wants to achieve. Supports then are aligned to maximize opportunities for the student. The person-centered planning process involves family, teachers, professionals, friends, the student (as appropriate), and any others who will provide support on behalf of the student. For older students, this type of planning should occur in conjunction with planning for postsecondary transition, such as college or career readiness and independent living skills. (Guidance on the person-centered planning process can be found at the Learning Community for Person Centered Practices; <http://tlcpcp.com>.)

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations present evidence-based, positive educational strategies for enhancing the educational outcomes of students with ID within general education contexts. They are grouped into two general categories: (a) prevention approaches and (b) intervention strategies. It is important to implement these approaches and strategies in alignment with the individual's identified needs.

Prevention Approaches

The following recommendations describe classroom supports and activities to build student engagement and prevent behavior challenges.

Classroom Layout and Visual Supports

The classroom should be arranged in ways that are visually appealing and provide clear guidance to students who may have limited reading skills.

1. ***Clearly define areas of the classroom by function.*** Label areas, such as the computer area and snack area, with words and pictures.
2. ***Store common classroom materials on accessible shelves and in see-through containers.*** Provide labels (words paired with pictures) for the materials in each container or drawer.
3. ***Post a clear and predictable daily schedule.*** For students who are unable to read words or recognize basic picture prompts, use objects to represent activities on the schedule (e.g., a granola bar wrapper to represent snack time).
 - List all activities, including short activity times, alternating between physical and seated activities. As with any new skill, it is important to teach how to use the schedule. You can do this by physically prompting students (from behind) to go to the desired area. It is important not to be in front leading students as this can cause them to be overly dependent. For students with strong verbal skills, you can explain the concepts of the schedule.
 - Review the day's schedule at the start of each day and have the student check the schedule throughout the day.
4. ***Provide the student with a work and study space that is quiet and free from distractions.*** Use this space only for work or study so the student develops a routine and understands that this space is for time to concentrate on a task, not to play.
5. ***Develop a system for the student to ask for help.*** Explicitly teach students to raise their hands or use an alternate method to ask for help (e.g., cue card, signal card, or other gesture).
6. ***Use change-in-routine or stress cards.*** These are small cards (business-card size) that can remind students to stay calm when a change in the normal school day occurs or when something happens that is stressful.
 - Change-in-routine cards include pictures or lists that prompt the student to be aware

of what will happen during the day when a change is required. The cards allow the teacher to notify the student of how, when, and why the daily routine has changed and afford the student a degree of predictability to the day.

- Stress cards are picture-based supports that are effective for students prone to temper tantrums. They include pictures and lists that permit students to express fears anxieties and begin to explore ways to control their emotions.

Motivation

Students with ID likely find many academic activities challenging. It may be beneficial to specifically consider ways to enhance their engagement.

7. **Alternate between preferred and less-preferred activities.** Students with ID likely will put more sustained effort into assignments and activities when they know they can take part in a fun or interesting activity at the end.
8. **Incorporate the student's interests or passions to support learning.** Students with ID will be more engaged when their favorite interests are incorporated into the lesson. The person-centered planning process will provide this information.
9. **Provide meaningful choices that give the student with ID some autonomy and control within the classroom.** For example, you may encourage the student to select who to work with, where to work, what materials to use, and the order of activities.
10. **Use verbal or visual prompts before the student engages in an activity or task to promote success.** Phrase your prompt to reflect what you would like to see the student do (e.g., "Please sit with your feet on the floor.") rather than what you would like the student to stop doing (e.g., "Please don't sit on your feet.").

Intervention Strategies

Recommendations cover areas involving academic instruction, behavior instruction, communication skills, functional skills, and social skills.

Academics

High-quality instruction methods that are useful for all students will also be useful for students with ID. However, some modifications should be considered.

11. **Break down learning tasks into small steps and present each learning task one step at a time.** Wait

until one step is mastered, then introduce the next. Have the student perform steps to demonstrate understanding.

12. **Use concrete items and examples to explain new concepts.** Provide direct instruction and incorporate activities and hands-on learning to help the student acquire and retain information.
13. **Give the student time and multiple opportunities to practice skills that have been taught.** Increase the frequency of feedback the student receives to maintain motivation and interest, as well as increase the likelihood of desirable academic behaviors. The student's quiet work or study space can be used to continue practice, as needed.
14. **Teach the student rules for determining what information is relevant and discriminating between correct and incorrect solutions.** Use visual strategies such as semantic maps, guided notes, and other graphic organizers to promote understanding.
15. **Use various strategies to improve or strengthen memory.** For example, mnemonics, elaborative rehearsal, and clustering strategies may be helpful.
16. **When possible, teach core content embedded within a functional activity.** For example, conduct a lesson about the laws of motion on the playground. Consider alternative activities that teach practical skills that will be useful when academic material is well above the student's level.

Behavior

Students with ID can be expected to require a greater degree of direct instruction regarding behavior than their same-age peers.

17. **Clearly state what behaviors you expect in the classroom.** Use visual supports, posted throughout the classroom, to reaffirm behavioral expectations.
18. **Provide direct and immediate feedback on behavior.** Doing so allows students to see the link between their behavior and the teacher's response. An interruption or delay in providing feedback makes it difficult for students with ID to form a cause-and-effect connection.
19. **Use behavior agreements or contracts along with a token economy.** Such strategies must specify the expected behaviors, the criteria for performance, and reinforcement available for goal attainment.
20. **Focus on reinforcing replacement behaviors that serve as alternatives to inappropriate behaviors.**

Use of punishment should be limited as it may increase the probability of problematic behaviors.

Communication

Many students with ID will require direct attention to their communication skills, especially if their verbal communication is limited.

21. **Develop a communication system specific to the student's strengths and needs.** If the student with ID has limited or no language, identify and establish an appropriate functional communication system (e.g., sign language, voice output device, pictures or symbols, assistive technology). Any communication system should be portable and accessible to the student *at all times*.
22. **Reinforce all communication attempts, gestures, or partial verbalizations.** Paraphrase what the child indicated to ensure that you understood.
23. **Provide supplements to verbal instruction.** Use sequence cards or other picture schedules to teach task requirements, set expectations, and portray the order of the day's events.

Daily Living and Functional Skills

The student's long-term goals ("hopes and dreams" identified through the person-centered planning process) are part of the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) and should specifically address development of independent living skills.

24. **Teach a variety of daily living skills as frequently as possible.** Use visual supports (e.g., pictures, symbols), video prompting, and video modeling to demonstrate each step of the self-help, hygiene, safety, and other skills or tasks.
25. **Help students develop self-awareness, decision-making, and interpersonal skills.** Teach students appropriate work habits and basic job competencies within naturalistic settings whenever possible, that is, in the school, home, or community settings.
26. **Provide multiple opportunities for students to apply what they have learned.** For example, students may have preprinted cards (e.g., true/false, yes/no) to hold up in response to a question asked by the teacher. Promote application of skills to other settings (e.g., field trips, home).
27. **Fade prompts over time to promote independence.** Use most-to-least prompting to teach new skills. Once skills are learned, fade prompts as quickly

as possible so the student does not become dependent on them.

28. **Teach stranger safety skills.** Teach students how to distinguish strangers encountered in everyday life (e.g., waitress, flight attendant, repairman) from potentially dangerous strangers (e.g., random shopper in a grocery store who asks the child to keep a secret). Role-play different scenarios to help the student prepare for situations that are likely to occur.

Social Skills and Socialization

Students with ID will benefit from systematic instruction in social behaviors, where needed, as well as environmental supports to ensure inclusion to the extent possible.

29. **Directly teach and guide social skill development.** Many students with ID will require explicit instruction in areas such as classroom behavior, conversation starting, social distance, basic social interaction, and turn taking. However, before undertaking such instruction, it is important to determine whether the student is demonstrating a skill deficit or a performance deficit. Skill deficits exist when the desired behaviors are not in the student's repertoire (i.e., the student has never demonstrated the behavior). These deficits must be addressed through explicit instruction. A performance deficit exists when the student has demonstrated the desired behavior on occasion but does not show the behavior consistently when required. These deficits occur when the student has little motivation to perform the task or does not know when to engage in the desired behavior. In these situations, additional teaching is not likely to be successful. Instead, support, encourage, and reinforce the desired behaviors. If you are not sure whether the problem reflects a skill deficit or a performance deficit, start by providing additional incentives to perform the desired behavior. If the student does not respond to desirable incentives, it is likely that the problem is a skill deficit and explicit instruction will be needed.
30. **Teach each skill sequentially and in small steps.** Use modeling, role-playing, multiple opportunities for practice, and positive reinforcement.
31. **Use visual strategies.** Methods such as Social Stories, Power Cards, and video modeling can be used to teach skills at home or in community settings.

32. **Discuss the potential dangers of cyberbullying and questionable use of social media.** Provide explicit instruction on the appropriate use of social media. Help students with ID to identify inappropriate demands from others (e.g., asking for sexually explicit photos).
33. **Provide many opportunities for the student with ID to interact directly with typically developing peers.** If possible, arrange desks in clusters instead of rows to promote social interactions. Seat the student with ID near peers who demonstrate appropriate behavior.
34. **Involve the student in as many peer-mediated activities as possible to promote inclusion and interaction.** Consider using integrated play groups or Circle of Friends activities that decrease social isolation and assist the student with ID in learning and practicing positive skills in natural contexts.
35. **Assign the student a peer buddy.** Peer buddies accompany the student at recess, lunch, or assemblies or events outside of the classroom. Over time, select different children to serve as a buddy to promote friendship building.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites

www.pbis.org

The website on the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports framework provides resources for implementing effective social, emotional, and behavioral support in schools.

<http://tlcpcp.com>

The website for the Learning Community for Person-Centered Practices provides tools and evidence-based practice for promoting inclusion.

www.ccids.umaine.edu

The website for the Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies provides templates for visual supports and links for creating visual materials.

Books

Downing, J. (2010). *Academic instruction for students with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities in inclusive classrooms*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

This hands-on guide provides practical information for adapting a curriculum to meet

family goals and state standards using universal design for learning.

Lewis, R. B., Wheeler, J. J., & Carter, S. L. (2017). *Teaching students with special needs in general education classrooms* (9th ed.). New York, NY: Pearson.

This practical resource guides readers on how, when, and with whom to use various evidence-based interventions for students with disabilities.

Newton, C., & Wilson, D. (2003). *Creating circles of friends: A peer support and inclusion workbook*. Nottingham, UK: Inclusive Solutions UK.

This workbook provides practical information on how to include students with disabilities into friendship groups.

Turnbull, A. A., Turnbull, H. R., Wehmeyer, M. L., & Shogren, K. A. (2016). *Exceptional lives: Special education in today's schools* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Pearson.

Real-life stories and examples demonstrate the application of evidence-based practices within inclusive contexts.

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