

# Special Ed Preschools: Help or Hindrance?

Revolutionary Common Sense  
by Kathie Snow

For many parents, special ed preschools are like manna from heaven, an answer to a prayer, and the greatest thing since sliced bread! But when we look beyond the apparent benevolence of “helping” young children with disabilities, we’ll know that the special ed preschool experience may be a hindrance to a child’s current and future success.

In most states, three- or four-year-old children who *do not* have disabilities do not attend public school; they’re in their natural environments at home, in day care, and/or at private preschools in their neighborhoods. Thus, a segregated special ed preschool in an elementary school is an unnatural—and potentially harmful—environment.

The natural proportion of children with disabilities in the United States is estimated to be ten percent. So in a group of twenty children, no more than two would be children with disabilities. But this natural proportion is *always violated* in special ed preschools, even in those that recruit typical kids as “peer role models.” Many of us know that segregating adults with disabilities—whether in institutions, congregate living settings, sheltered workshops, or adult day programs—represents old ways of thinking and old ways of doing things. Social isolation and physical segregation are morally reprehensible.

**We can and should do better for young children with disabilities than placing them in segregated, unnatural environments. They deserve more than that.**

And most of us are working hard to get school-aged children out of segregated classrooms and into inclusive regular ed classrooms with the appropriate accommodations and supports.

Why, then, do we have no qualms about segregating very young children with disabilities? Why do we have no compunction about putting very vulnerable young kiddos on long bus rides to the preschool class at the elementary school across town? *We do things to children with disabilities we would never do to children without disabilities.*

Many parents argue vehemently that their child’s special ed preschool is a wonderful, inclusive classroom. When pressed for details, however, they reveal that yes, all (or the majority) of the children in the class do have a label of one kind or another. Some are not labeled with “official” disabilities. Instead, they fall into the “needy” category for one

reason or another (as represented by combination Head Start/Special Ed Preschool classes). So how can this be a natural environment when almost every child in the classroom has somehow been labeled “deficient?” *Dub!*

Children who have not yet acquired speech are placed in a class with other young children who cannot talk yet. How do we expect them to acquire speech in this setting? If we want a child to learn to speak, shouldn’t he be

## 2 - Special Ed Preschools: Help or Hindrance?

surrounded by others who speak? Place a child who has autism with other children with autism and guess what? He learns to have more autism!

In many special ed preschool classrooms, teachers have low expectations for a child's intellectual or social development. In fact, a child may be allowed to behave in ways which the child's parents would *not* allow. A teacher may think, "Kids with [whatever] are just that way." Do we need to wonder why many children aren't progressing like we know they could?

Segregation leads to segregation. Every year, millions of parents are dismayed and angered when they learn their children will *not* be moving from a special ed early childhood class to a regular ed kindergarten class. For any number of reasons, a child who has spent two years in a "get-ready" program is still deemed "not ready" for the regular ed environment at age five. Worse, many children are *held back* for another year! How does one "fail" preschool, for Pete's sake? (This never happens in typical preschools.) No one, of course, ever looks to the special ed preschool environment as a potential *cause* of the child not being "ready." Instead, everyone "blames the child."

From this point on, many parents expend extraordinary effort to extricate their children from segregated public school classrooms. In too many cases, children are incarcerated in "resource rooms" for the remainder of their school careers. They leave the public school system, uneducated or undereducated, and unprepared for life as successful young adults. Too many will move into

the world of adult services, join the ranks of the 75 percent of adults with disabilities who are unemployed and are living below the poverty line while collecting disability welfare.

Are there exceptions to the doom and gloom I've painted of special ed preschools? Of course. But only a very few. Some school districts never created special ed preschools. Instead, they take services to the child in his natural environment (home, neighborhood preschool, or day care).

We can and should do better for young children with disabilities than placing them in unnatural, segregated environments. They deserve more than that. Each and every child deserves the opportunity to live a natural life.

Where would a child be spending his time if he didn't have a disability? Wherever that is, *that's where he should be*. He will benefit from being at home with mom, playing and learning in a typical preschool with kids who don't have disabilities, and experiencing life to the fullest, included in his community. How dare we presume a young child with a disability is so incompetent that he must be placed in a special program?

"Yes, but—" many parents wail, "my child loves it, he's doing well, it's a great classroom, it's free daycare," and on and on. All of this may be true. But consider this: a young child who has been successful in inclusive, natural environments is far more likely to be included in a regular ed kindergarten class than one who has been in a "special" environment. He will be viewed by educators as competent and successful, and these attributes will be his ticket to an inclusive education. Inclusion begets inclusion.



Learn more about preschool inclusion in Kathie's book, *Disability is Natural: Revolutionary Common Sense for Raising Successful Children with Disabilities*, available from [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com) or toll-free 1-866-948-2222.

---

©2001-06 Kathie Snow. Permission is granted for non-commercial use of this article: you may photocopy to share with others as a handout. Please tell me how/when you use it: [kathie@disabilityisnatural.com](mailto:kathie@disabilityisnatural.com). Do not violate copyright laws: *request permission before reprinting in newsletters, web sites, list serves, etc.* To learn more new ways of thinking, to sign up for the free Disability is Natural E-Newsletter, to see products that promote positive images, or to learn about Kathie's *Disability is Natural* book and video, visit: