

Meeting Individual Educational Plans Using the Project Approach

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Introduction

Is the Project Approach appropriate for all children, including those with special needs? Of course! But some educators may be hesitant to use the Project Approach to meet individual educational plans (IEPs) because it seems too difficult to incorporate a child's specific goals with a project topic. Some teachers become comfortable meeting IEP goals by planning more teacher-directed activities. Other teachers may feel a child's developmental or communication delays inhibit his or her ability to be interested, to learn from the experience, or to achieve project goals. A child with special needs may require more assistance to participate in a project activity—for example, holding the paintbrush to make strokes on a representation of a refrigerator seen at the pizza parlor. Some classrooms have limited numbers of adults to spend extra time with a child with special needs; however, if they rethink their approach to meeting IEP goals, educators can accommodate children's individual needs using the Project Approach.

According to Rebecca Edmiaston (1998), the Project Approach is well suited to meeting the needs of all young children, including those with special needs. After studying inclusive environments, Edmiaston provides five reasons in support of using the Project Approach with children who have special needs:

1. Projects are collaborative—children and teachers work collaboratively, and all children contribute in their own way.
2. Projects are based on children's interests—learning experiences can be shaped to meet all the children's needs.
3. Projects include a variety of activities and experiences. Individual abilities are taken into consideration, and IEPs can be integrated.
4. Small groups take on much of the work during a project, making it easier to meet individual needs and include children with special needs.
5. Documentation of the project emphasizes the learning experiences and strengths of the children.

At St. Ambrose University Children's Campus (SAUCC), the Project Approach is used to meet curriculum objectives and goals for individual educational plans involving children with special needs. The center serves as a least restrictive environment for families in a variety of school districts. The Bluebird classroom serves children 3, 4, and 5 years old. Children with individual educational plans are involved in learning experiences, and documentation supports growth and achievement for specific goals and benchmarks. If a child's IEP goals and benchmarks are supported with documentation, school districts will see the learning that is occurring as a result of firsthand learning experiences such as those afforded by the Project Approach. Two families have given permission to use examples of their children's IEP benchmarks and documentation to help explain how using the Project Approach can meet children's individual needs.

Jenna

Jenna is a vibrant, 4.5-year-old young child with a medical diagnosis of cerebral palsy (CP). Her CP affects her speech and gross and fine motor movements. Jenna's IEP focuses on goals for school readiness, language, and motor development. When Jenna was about 2.5 years old, Lori, Jenna's mother, began noticing a gap in the

interactions between Jenna and her peers. She didn't want Jenna to be an observer of classroom life but rather an active participant. Jenna was enrolled in our center just before her third birthday. Lori writes,

I saw an immediate difference in the environment. The children, who are accustomed to seeing special needs peers, immediately warmed to Jenna and included her in their play. The gap that I saw was immediately gone! ... the Project Approach to learning naturally includes all the kids and their perspectives. It allows the learning to come from them instead of solely from the teacher. Jenna's curiosity has been stimulated, and I see that transfer to our home. Even with speech, I see Jenna's eyes sparkle with curiosity as the group explores a project. I observe her listening and thinking intently and asking questions and carrying out some action related to the project. She is able to achieve, with whatever modifications are necessary, what her peers are able to achieve. Her self-esteem has improved, her social interactions have improved, and she has made tremendous progress in meeting her developmental milestones. Because of this type of environment and the Project Approach, I see Jenna blossoming and being involved in learning and life, which is the ultimate goal.

Jenna actively explored the guitar, cello, and bass during the Stringed Instrument Project. She used her communication device to name the instruments and request specific songs. Jenna investigated all instruments by strumming or picking the strings and participated in a variety of small group curriculum activities. Following are some examples of her learning experiences and documentation to support IEP benchmark achievements.

Throughout the entire project, the children were exposed to a variety of guitar shapes and sizes. The guitars provided ample opportunities for comparisons of similarities and differences, as well as music-making experiences.

Jenna held the pick of the guitar with her finger and thumb (Figure 1). She requested to play "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" by opening and closing her hands, like a twinkling star. She used the pick on the strings while Stacie sang. In the language of her

IEP, Jenna strengthened her abilities to use a pincer grasp to hold a tiny object.



Figure 1. Jenna explored a guitar during the Stringed Instrument Project.

A rolling and building game was played to strengthen Jenna's mathematical thinking skills. After rolling the die, the dots were counted, and corresponding blocks were stacked. The stack of blocks was compared to the size of the guitar (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Jenna pointed to dots on a die.

Jenna pointed to the dots on the die. She placed one block on top of the die and two more around the die to equal three, the same number on the die. Jenna strengthened the following IEP benchmarks: understanding quantity concepts 1 through 5 and participating in an adult-led activity.

During a field site visit to seek answers to questions, children played the cello and bass. Some children also sketched instruments.

Jenna made vertical strokes on her paper (Figure 3). She pointed to the part of the instrument she sketched. She made the strings on the bass. She met the following IEP benchmark: attempting vertical images on paper with minimal assistance.

Figure 3. Jenna sketched the strings on a bass.

Nathan

Nathan is a 5.2-year-old, energetic boy who was diagnosed with a congenital heart defect in the first days of his life. Nathan has a chromosomal abnormality and is diagnosed with severe oral apraxia. Nathan's IEP focuses on goals for school readiness, language, and motor development. Karla, Nathan's mother, writes,

The use of projects has allowed Nathan to demonstrate initiation as he becomes interested and excited about the topic. Nathan initiated constructing a guitar when musical instruments were available to explore. He also constructed a dog kennel when pets were the project topic.

Our child-led environment and the Project Approach have strengthened Nathan's attention span, as well as his communication and socialization skills.

During "Doctor Tools/Casts," Nathan (4.0 years) participated in investigating a variety of doctor tools. He learned new sign language to identify the tools and manipulated them to figure out how they are used by doctors. Nathan also investigated the texture of casts and how they are made. Following are some examples of his learning experiences and documentation to support IEP benchmark achievements.

Dramatic play was an important avenue for learning and an effective technique to include all children in our classroom, especially those who continued to build their language skills. Props allowed us to gather knowledge prior to our field site visit and after our field site visit.

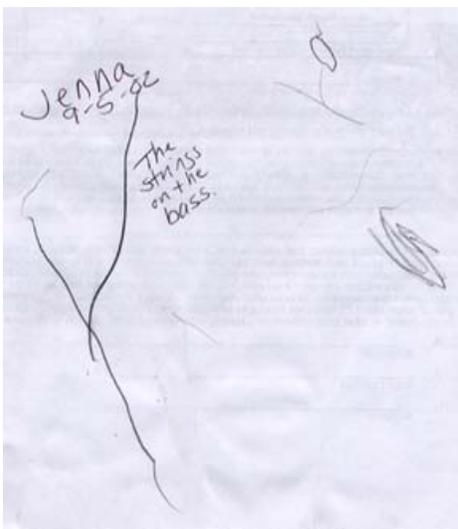


Figure 4. Nathan participated in investigating a variety of tools used by doctors.

Nathan imitated, using sign language, "Look, ear," to tell a friend to look in his ear (Figure 4). For Nathan's IEP, he strengthened his ability to take turns with a peer and imitated sign language, increasing his communication skills.

After a visitor shared his experience with a broken finger and a new cast, children made representations of casts.

Nathan created a cast out of Model Magic dough (Figure 5). He pressed the dough on his arm and hand. He learned the sign "band aid" for the word cast. During this experience, he met the following



individual benchmarks: handling materials appropriately and poking, rolling, and squeezing a dough art medium.



Figure 5. Nathan created a cast out of Model Magic dough.

During Phase 2, the children shared knowledge and asked questions regarding several tools used by doctors. Nathan manipulated the stethoscope and tongue depressor (Figures 6 & 7).

Nathan put the stethoscope on and listened to my heart. He gave me the stethoscope and lifted his shirt, communicating that he wanted me to listen to his heart. He also demonstrated how to use the tongue depressor. Nathan met the following individual goals: waiting for and taking turns, handling materials appropriately, and expressing his needs.

Conclusion

Is the Project Approach appropriate for all children, including those with special needs? Yes, Jenna and Nathan's experiences with project work have proven to be successful in meeting their individual educational plan goals. Both children have participated in all projects since their arrival at SAUCC, with their level of participation varying. Jenna and Nathan have both explored independently, as well as with assistance. IEP goals were incorporated with project activities on lesson plans, and several goals were strengthened and achieved. Learning experiences and documentation

created evidence needed to support the individual educational plans for children with special needs. The Project Approach can meet the needs of all young children, including those children with special needs.

Figure 6. Nathan put on the stethoscope.

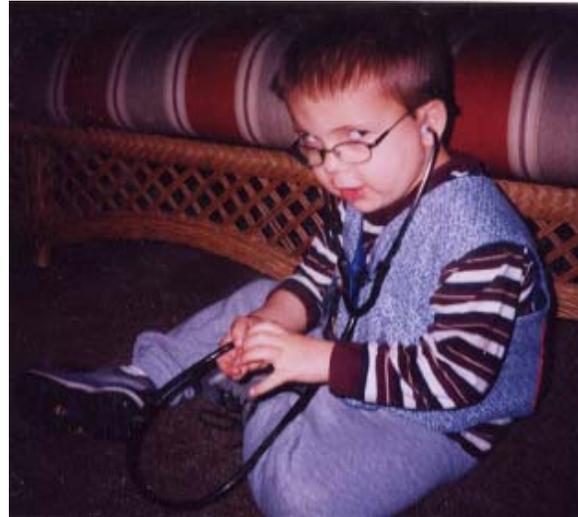


Figure 7. Nathan used a tongue depressor.

References

Edmiaston, R. K. (1998). Projects in inclusive early childhood classrooms. In J. H. Helm (Ed.), *The project approach catalog 2* (pp. 1:19-1:22). Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. (ERIC Document No. ED424036)