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## Top 10 Tips For Inclusion at School

When living with a disability, one of the most common barriers to success faced by children and youth is feeling excluded at school. Students may be treated differently in the classroom, by their teachers and their peers, and may feel like they are not part of a whole. This could happen unintentionally or due to a lack of understanding. Following these simple tips can solve the problem and create a more inclusive environment at school:

### 1. Don't assume

*TIP:* Never make assumptions about what a student can/cannot do. What you see is not always what you get. It is more important to understand a situation by asking questions and educating yourself rather than by making assumptions.

*STUDENT PERSPECTIVE:* I have abilities and would like to have the opportunity to use those abilities to learn just like other students. Please see me first as a person, then see my disability, not the other way around.

### 2. Always communicate

*TIP:* The best way to be sure of anything is through good communication. This means communicating with students about their needs and feelings, communicating with parents about any situation and their expectations, and articulating your own experiences as well. Take the guesswork out of it.

*STUDENT PERSPECTIVE:* I have feelings too and in most cases I am able to share those feelings in one way or another. If you want to know how I feel or how I am doing, just ask!

### 3. Take the time to listen

*TIP:* The best way to communicate and understand is to listen. Parents are a child's greatest advocate and can provide specific strategies for the individual needs of their child. Asking questions is important, but without listening closely to the answers, there is no real value. Listen with your heart, not your head. What you feel is the right thing, usually is.

*STUDENT PERSPECTIVE:* Sometimes I feel like I'm being ignored. No matter how hard I try to say or show what I am feeling or experiencing, it is like no one is listening. How am I supposed to feel included if I am being ignored?

### 4. Empathy is key

*TIP:* Look at things from the student's perspective. Be compassionate, caring and understanding of others' feelings and experiences. Try to put yourself in their shoes. Ask yourself how you would feel, or what you would want in a similar situation.

*STUDENT PERSPECTIVE:* I do not feel sorry for myself, so why should you feel sorry for me? Taking pity on me only makes me feel worse and more isolated. It is more helpful when you try to understand what I am going through. Consider the room's arrangement: can everyone move around? Do I have the same access as others?

### 5. Do not categorize

*TIP:* When working with students, it is often easier to categorize than to spend the time and treat everyone as an individual. However, everyone has their own abilities and disabilities. To create an inclusive classroom, take the time to identify the individual needs of all students.

*STUDENT PERSPECTIVE:* Just because I am different, it does not mean I am the same as everyone else who is. We each have our own personalities, strengths and weaknesses. If you take the time to learn about me as an individual, I am more likely to succeed.

### 6. Be an enabler

*TIP:* Where there is a will, there is a way. If a child wants to skydive, there has got to be a way to make it happen! And even if there is not, it is your responsibility to at least try. Take the word "no" out of your vocabulary and replace it with the attitude that anything is possible. It's contagious.

*STUDENT PERSPECTIVE:* I have hopes and I have dreams but my motivations can quickly disappear with one simple word: no. When I hear the word yes, I feel stronger, happier and more empowered.

**7. Plan for accessibility**

*TIP:* True inclusion is not just placing students with disabilities in the classroom. It means that all students are learning in a respectful environment. Are group activities and peer interactions set up in a way that is mutually respectful? Do not let students with disabilities be an afterthought when planning lessons and activities. Make them an equal part in the process.

*STUDENT PERSPECTIVE:* Just because I am here it does not mean I am always being included. Think about me and others with disabilities in everything you do or plan. We are here all the time but we do not always feel like we are being included.

**8. Be supportive**

*TIP:* Things are not always going to be easy for you, the students or the parents. The best way you can handle a situation is to be supportive. Come to the table with a solutions-based approach and a positive attitude.

*STUDENT PERSPECTIVE:* Remember, I am a child first and a student second. Sometimes I just need a helping hand and some support like *everyone* else. Positivity and encouragement inspire me and confirm my ability to achieve success.

**9. Teach inclusion to everyone**

*TIP:* Transform perspectives by educating your students about accessibility and inclusion and modelling successful inclusion. If you have questions about disability, accessibility and inclusion, chances are others in the classroom will too. Incorporate equity, inclusion and accessibility through all classroom communication and activities will generate a more accepting atmosphere as a result.

*STUDENT PERSPECTIVE:* My peers often look at me differently not because they do not care but because they do not understand. You and I may get it, but not everyone else knows what it is like to live with a disability – especially at school. Educating them about it is as important as including me.

**10. Treat everyone equally**

*TIP:* It is the golden rule to treat others the same way you want to be treated. This is not only true for students with disabilities but for everyone in the classroom, at school, and in society. Treating everyone equally, giving equal opportunity and remove undue barriers also removes impediments to success and achievement.

*STUDENT PERSPECTIVE:* I want to be treated like everyone else. I may need some accommodations at times to meet my needs, but mostly I want to be part of what everyone is doing. I can be encouraged to grow and to be my best, just like any other student. And I can do great things. Everyone can.

