

Children who Require more Attention and Opportunities

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Children in the age group of 3 to 6 years play and learn together in various setups, such as preschool and the neighbourhood. This is the time for them to discover differences in a positive light. An inclusive classroom should be designed to provide access, participation and support to all children so that all can learn and develop optimally.

When we first started to work with *anganwadis* in the Sangareddy district of Telangana, we often observed incidents of exclusion in the classroom, especially with respect to children whose pace of learning and development was slow. We noticed that most of the time, these children sat alone, struggled to complete tasks, got easily distracted and had a tendency to move around. *Anganwadi* teachers found it difficult to include them in the activities because it required extra time and effort. Also, the other children in the classroom did not seem interested in playing with these children. This impacted their regularity and duration of stay in the *anganwadi*.

Although there are only a few children in each *anganwadi* who need more support, any form of exclusion impacts their self-esteem, interest in learning and the continuation of their education. It can also manifest in attention-seeking by distracting others, including hitting them. Feeling excluded and alone creates many issues for the child, as well as for the teacher in class management.

Awareness of principles of development

To address this issue, we started creating awareness among our *anganwadi* teachers regarding child behaviour, the role of inclusive classroom practices in child development and the importance of educating parents on these issues. This was done through workshops using specific cases and scenarios as examples and asking teachers how they would ensure the participation of all children, especially those who face challenges.

Along with this, during *anganwadi* visits, we supported teachers in practices for including children who require additional support. It took the teachers some time to understand and practise inclusion in their classrooms.

Once the teachers got acquainted with the principles of child development, they realised that each child develops and learns at their own pace, which is greatly influenced by their early experiences at home. Instead of labelling a child as a 'slow learner', this realisation made the teachers examine the reasons and understand the background of a child who needed more support.

Teachers improved their awareness of children's developmental milestones and age and developmentally appropriate opportunities for children, which helped them understand each child's developmental progress. With this understanding, teachers could identify the children who require more time and opportunities to learn and develop. With their improved pedagogical practices, teachers started ensuring that these children get adequate opportunities to learn in all activities. For example, during a conversation activity, if a child is not participating and sitting away from the others in the corner, the teacher ensures that she is making eye contact with the child and that the child is listening to the other children's responses. Now and then, she asks the child if they want to say or add something when she



Figure 1: Children being supported by their teacher to read.



Figure 2: Children waiting for their turn during a class game.

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asks a question. She gives the child some time to respond. Without insistence, she continues to provide the child with such opportunities. The child gradually begins to sit with the group and participates in the conversation.

During home visits and monthly parent-teacher meetings (ECCE Day), teachers educate parents on what practices

they need to change at home to make the home environment stimulating and support the child to learn and develop.

In this article, we present two case studies where *anganwadi* teachers demonstrated inclusive practices for children who required more support.

Case study 1

A 2-year-old child's parents learnt that the child needs special attention and opportunities as the child finds it difficult to control reflexes and expressive communication, grabs things and pushes others. The parents wanted to admit their child to a preschool where the child could play and interact with other children. However, after learning about the child's condition, no private preschool was ready to admit him, even though the mother was ready to shadow the teacher. The mother then approached a nearby *anganwadi* teacher and assured her that she would take care that her child did not hurt other children. The teacher spoke to the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) supervisor who also understood the situation and admitted the child.

Initially, the teacher and other children faced difficulty in involving this child in their day-to-day activities. However, after understanding the child's behaviour patterns, both the teacher and *anganwadi* helper patiently included the child in all the activities with the support of the child's mother. In the beginning, the child's mother had to hold the child's hand all the time. By observing other children, this child slowly started playing and interacting with others. Currently, the child is engaging in *Corner Play* with other children, identifying shapes and colours, communicating needs and identifying other children by their names.

In the above situation, though the teacher was not an expert in managing a child with behavioural differences, she did her best. She first tried to include this child with other children but realised that she could not manage time well because the child needed extra attention, and she had to be extremely patient to engage the child and include her in the activities. So, she started planning her activities and time in such a way that the child could be given adequate attention,

other children also learned to wait for their turns, so the teacher had the space to encourage this child to participate – she created an environment where this child felt welcome, respected and valued. In this process, the child's mother's support was crucial to bring the child into the mainstream. She continues to engage the child in different activities using various materials at home and continues to learn teaching strategies to support the child at home.

Case study 2

An *anganwadi* teacher found it difficult to engage a 4-year-old child who showed disinterest in all activities and signs of frustration and boredom. During *Circle Time* the child would take a long time to comprehend ideas and rarely played with other children during group activities. After careful observation of the child's learning patterns, behaviours and responses during the activities, the teacher understood that this child required more attention.

The teacher started focusing on balancing large, small, and individual instructional activities in a day. This gave scope for the teacher to interact, support and guide the child more frequently. During small group activities, she encouraged children to finish the tasks by supporting each other. This made the child feel happy for the small achievements with other children. During *Circle Time*, the teacher started practising 'wait a moment before responding'. This gave time to the child to think and respond. She started tracking the child's progress and identified areas that required more attention. Along with this, the teacher maintained open communication with the parents to gain insights into the child's learning habits at home and adjusted the teaching strategies as per the child's interests. The teacher recognised and appreciated the child's small achievements which boosted the child's self-esteem and motivated the child to continue learning. With all these efforts, now the child is eager to participate in activities and interacts and plays happily with peers.

Conclusion

Engaging and nurturing children with learning difficulties in their early years requires sensitivity, patience and dedication. Each child's journey is unique and each one needs individual guidance and encouragement to

overcome challenges and achieve their potential. This is a big challenge for the teacher, and they too require continuous support to build their capacities and stay motivated.



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