

Modifying environments

To illustrate the value of shaping modifying environments and the considerations that might be at play in the decision to work with the environment, we would like to present the case of Ezra. When the parents of Ezra first contacted our centre, he was 3 years old. Ezra showed developmental delays in language and motor skills as a result of the Wiedemann-Steiner syndrome. He attended a day-care group for two days each week, where they were concerned about his development. He received additional individual support at the day-care centre, mostly with a focus on fine motor skills and speech. He also received speech- and physical therapy once a week.

The start

In working with Ezra, we started with an initial observation at the day-care group to make a first estimation of his needs for support. In this observation, we saw that he was able to profit from what was offered at the day-care group. Considerations included his young age, and the schedule of other individual therapies. We decided that it would benefit him more to attend the day-care group more often and to provide them with regular (about once a month) support. Our expectation was that this would provide him with more opportunity to develop than to work with Ezra in an individual setting. More exposure to same-aged peers and the expectations for him to adapt and fall in line with the group would provide him with more learning opportunities in a more natural learning situation than individual sessions.



The “mindset” of parents and teachers

The parents were fast to act on this, and decided to make him go to the day-care group 2 full days and two extra mornings. This enabled him to use the afternoons to rest and play on his

own level. Ezra was able to use this increase in frequency and soon made progress, especially on cognitive skills. He did, however, need some support on switching between activities and following along with the group. For this, we (counterintuitively) recommended to provide him with as little support as possible. Staff were instructed to only ask him what he's supposed to do when he seems lost or does not proceed along with the group towards the next activity. For the situations where individual support was available for group activities, we recommended the staff to maintain more distance and use more pointing and modelling than direct interference with what he was doing.

Special but the same

Another important factor in the regular observations was to point out his growth and emphasize how much he was not different from any of the others. This way, we tried to emphasize that he should not be treated any different than other children unless it was absolutely necessary.

The changes

After half a year, school and parents concluded that he had progressed enough to start in a kindergarten group. His speech had improved enough to make himself understandable (and he had become one of the most talkative children in the group), he was independent in choosing games and recognized which games were too easy for him. A point of concern was still that he sometimes would be a little bit easy in expecting other to help him. So the most important recommendation that was made was to always give him the opportunity to try and do something independently and only help him if it was absolutely necessary.

Growing mind

The support continued once he had proceeded to kindergarten. Ezra initially needed some time to get used to the new situation and expectations that came along with the new class. The teachers initially voiced concerns about his level of focus, ability to work independently, and tendency to do different things than was expected from him. He also tended to ask for help rather easily. He used the liberties he could. In an observation we could indeed see that he struggled working on tasks for a longer period of time and took liberties he shouldn't. However, based on the short time he had been in the class, we recommended to have patience and treat him as normally as possible. This included being strict and setting clear rules and boundaries. The only exception for him should be on a fine motor skills level, as he simply did not possess the power to do some tasks independently. Most of all, we emphasized to just give him time and not worry too much.

The follow up

The following observation, it was clear that Ezra had made great progress and could come along with the group. The teacher confirmed that he was no longer one of the most difficult students to work with, and did not need the most help from her of the children in the class. He could do a number of tasks independently and



followed with the group most of the time. He did sometimes still show some difficulty in using spoken instructions. This appeared to be an auditory processing issue. In cases where he did not understand what was expected from him, we recommended to limit the amount of information in a single instruction. We also recommended practicing with auditory processing.

Currently, Ezra is showing himself to be a curious and social young boy. His speech is developing fast. He enjoys learning new games and playing them with his family, and is increasingly able to play for himself and build things. He still shows some struggles in terms of his focus in class and the processing of instruction, but the system around him is focussed on making him succeed.

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