Your Child Belongs
AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SERIES FOR FAMILIES

Video 3. How Can Schools Help My Child Become More Independent and Make Progress

Hello again and welcome to video three in our series for families. This one is all about *How Can Schools Help My Child Become More Independent and Make Progress.*

I'm excited for this one, Kristie, because these are bigger ideas that need to be understood by families, of course, and many of you already understand these things about your own child.

Yes. And so some of this work is just us helping educators understand this about your child. So in this particular video, we're going to be talking about presuming competence. We're going to be talking about supporting kids in ways where you hide in plain sight. We're going to talk about how do you promote friendships and how do you fade support.

All of these are things that I think are very intuitive for families, and sometimes it gets lost in the educational system. So you might just be thinking about you're the choir, and how can you then spread the word to other people.

So as always, you have your dashboard. There will be resources about each one of these strategies that you can download, share, and adapt in any way. You can share it with other families. You can certainly share it with your team.

Okay, the formula for success related to least restrictive environment and related to the law around students with disabilities, and it's that students have access to general education content, curriculum, and peers. They can participate in general education content and curriculum with peers, and they can make progress towards their goals within general education content, curriculum, and with their peers.

So how do we do that, right?

We've talked other ways about co-teaching and about access points and choice and making sure everyone's lids are on. And if you're like, what are those things? Check out the other videos in this series.

But we're going to start off again where we always do, which is mindset before methods, and we're going to talk about our beliefs. And we started even all the way back, Julie, to our introductory video and our welcome video about our beliefs about inclusive education.

Now we're really thinking about: what do I believe about my child? What does my team believe about my child? What do we say or write or how do we talk about them, and are we thinking about them as competent humans?

I think parents notice this a lot, particularly if you have a child with more significant support needs and you're out in public and someone might, for example, talk to your son or daughter or child in such a way that kind of makes you crinkle your nose. You're like, wait, what?

And they might be talking to them in an age-inappropriate way—like they're younger than they actually are—and that is an example of not presuming competence.

So when we talk about presuming competence, it means we believe that a student, that a child can succeed and be very successful in a general education classroom with the right supports.

You can either believe a student is competent or incompetent. If you believe them to be competent, you're going to create maximum opportunities and possibilities. You're going to find ways for students to demonstrate competence. You're going to give students access to high levels of academics, and you're going to give students access to friends and connections.

If, on the other hand, you believe them to be incompetent, they will not have these same opportunities.

So the beliefs translate into the practices in our school settings. And what we help educators to do is to presume that students can be successful—academically, socially, behaviorally—in general education. We give them the skills to make that happen.

So on your dashboard there are several examples of how to presume competence. On this slide, we're just going to highlight a couple of them.

Julie's already alluded to it and the benefits of why we do it, but I'm going to take the one that—based on your example, Julie—I'm going to take the one in green, which is the third one from the left:

Talk to every student the same way you would any other student of the same age or in the same context.

So if I see a four-year-old versus a 14-year-old out in the community with their grandparents, I'm not going to talk to them in the same way. I'm going to presume that they are able to—and this isn't like, you know, presuming that they all can speak English or that they all have communication that's verbal. I'm just going to do it like I normally would, which is I'm not going to think about, oh, can they talk? Do they understand me? Because they look different? They may not know English?

No, I just would approach them like I would anyone else, and then I go from there.

So I think that you've hit on it, but I just wanted to highlight it as one of the keys.

Kristie, I'm just going to briefly explain one other key, which is: Stephanie is a person with Down syndrome, and she's a high school student, and she was included her whole life. But her team said, "Why would Stephanie take English? She can't read the book; there's no way she's going to be learning Shakespeare and understanding it."

Stephanie and her family said, "Well, let's find out. Let's presume that she will get something out of reading Shakespeare and *Romeo and Juliet*."

And if I tell you, she loved *Romeo and Juliet* in the biggest way. She participated in lots of different ways. She had it read to her, she listened to it, she got to watch the movie along with her peers, and then she created a PowerPoint that was amazing about the key features of that specific story.

So we sometimes make assumptions that are wrong. And in this case, we're saying: let's presume it's possible—and then help make it so.

And so to help make it so, we have one more handout that Julie and I love a ton, and it's just called **Language That Lifts**. And we hope that the key place people will use this is at an IEP meeting—from the present level to identify needs, to how we write goals, supports, and services, or maybe even before we even get to the form—just how we talk about a particular student, especially if that student is at the IEP meeting.

So we hope that you will take this handout called *Language That Lifts* and really invite your team to look through a few examples. We don't want to shame people. We don't want to highlight when they're not using Language That Lifts or not presuming competence. But we do want to say: this is how we are going to operate. This is how we're going to talk about and think about our child.

Kristie, I'm just kind of showing this particular handout because it's so powerful, and I'm just going to go all the way back—if you remember our first video when we showed Mark and we showed how his team saw him.

They used a lot of negative words like non-compliant, inflexible, like behavioral issues. And what we're doing here is giving you all different ways to talk about, to think about, and write about students.

In this particular handout—Kristie, do you think there are, like, 60 maybe?

Yeah, 60 examples.

So this will help you in your IEP. It'll help you when talking about your child. Because the more people can see your child as a competent human being who's learning skills just like everybody else, the better they'll be included and the better their educational experience will be.

The second thing we're going to move into is this idea of what we call **hiding in plain sight**, which will make sense in a minute.

We want to start off with: sometimes we can over-support. Or sometimes the support comes by way of another adult—which sounds good, because they are a therapist, or they are assigned to my student, so they're going to be kept safe.

But there's sometimes some really significant unintended challenges or unintended consequences when we have adults supporting children and students in schools.

So we just want to highlight a couple—not to make anyone worried about the supports that they've probably fought really hard to get and/or that your student may need—but we want to think about how do those supports show up on a day-to-day basis.

We're going to start off: when paraprofessionals aren't trained well, these kinds of consequences can become really clear—like becoming dependent upon adults, interference with friendships, sometimes actually the paraprofessional or adult can create behavior problems.

They're quick to separate kids from other kids, or the paraprofessional relationship replaces the peer connection. And overall, just hanging out with an adult all the time creates stigmatization or impacts their belonging.

These are really common, researched problems with over-support or untrained support.

Instead, what we help school systems do is think about support that is just right.

We use the phrase **hide in plain sight**, which came from our good friend Jamie Burke. Jamie is a person with autism who types to communicate, who has been supported by paraprofessionals his whole schooling experience.

What he says here—and I'll read it out loud for you—I think is really, really powerful because it comes from the perspective of someone who has been receiving adult support. He says:

> "We are willing and ready to connect with other kids, and adults must quietly step in the background camouflaging their help as a tiger who may hide in full view. It is the needed disguise of the adult who smooths the way for friendship, then stands back in the shadows, observing the complicated dance of steps taking you to the feeling of confidence."

Kristie, what does this quote make you think of?

Well, it just makes me say, okay, supports are still needed, but you don't have to do it like in a way that announces it to the world. Like you can be, "Oh, I wore camouflage." You can be a little bit more, uh, discreet about it. Or you can make it something that anyone can have the support. So it's not just me and I'm called out. It's like, oh, thinking about, like, that story of Because of Oliver—that everyone might benefit from this choice, this access point, this type of support—versus just assuming because I have autism I'm going to benefit from it.

So to me, it's like acknowledging that I am still someone who needs support, but we don't have to make a big, you know, fanfare about it. There's other ways to go about it. And so those other ways, um, I think it warrants it just because it's a great handout.

If you're like, well, how would people do it? We have a handout on your dashboard that really plays up on this idea that support is a verb, which we've talked about in other videos in this series. But this one comes with 20 ways to provide invisible or silent support. So this is like, without the fanfare, how can people provide support on the fly?

Remember Julie said those research consequences are from people who are untrained. Um, how do we give training when there isn't time? How might we use visual supports effectively? Everyone says, yes, pair it with a visual, have a visual schedule, have a visual support. How do we do that without the unintended consequences?

Supporting communication—students who may use other ways to communicate. And then even specifically to paraprofessionals—we give 110 ways paras can support students that will avoid those consequences Julie shared just a minute ago.

So our goal for you, talking to parents today, is not, um, expecting you to know or be able to do all of this, but to give you an insight into what it means to create an inclusive school. It's very thoughtful. It's very—we help school systems really learn all these skills so that they can do a great job including your child.

And I think it really helps parents understand all that goes into this: from the best kinds of support, the most powerful classroom choices, um, etc.—to know that when all this is in place, your child belongs in an inclusive classroom of peers.

And Julie's going to tell a little story first. She can show you the cute kids. We're going to talk about a story about how peers can provide support, because remember the whole theme is: how do we promote independence—or in this case, interdependence—and how do we still make progress?

So we're thinking about presuming competence, hiding in plain sight, and now we're thinking about using peer support.

Okay, so I'm just going to introduce you to these two characters because they, um, were part of my research that I was doing in a school system. And this is Luke and this is Darius. Luke has several disabilities and uses a wheelchair. In this case, they're trick-or-treating actually, so he's using a stroller.

But I'm going to tell you a story that happened in class and then I'll bring it back to what's happening here.

Okay, so Luke, Darius... I'll stop sharing my screen. So I'm in a classroom observing. I'm taking data on social interactions between kids, and I notice that Luke is having a hard time. And he starts to breathe really loud. And when he breathes really loud, sometimes he'll pull hair, and sometimes he'll have other behaviors that are challenging.

So I'm watching, and I notice that Miss Murray comes over—she's the paraprofessional—and she provides a light support to his head, and he calms down. So I think: great, great support. Great, great, great. Jotting notes.

Well, then I overhear Darius, who's talking to a new student in class, and he says, "Hey dude, whenever Luke is naughty, Miss Murray gives him the claw." And I realize, oh—they think Jill's coming over and squishing Darius's brain. But in reality, she's doing a light touch.

So I tell her, "Hey Jill, a lot of people—Darius at least—thinks that you might be hurting Luke to get him to comply." And she's like, "Oh okay, I'll tell everybody during morning meeting what craniosacral support is, why I provide this light touch, and how it calms Luke's body."

So she does a little presentation to the whole class. Everybody's really listening. And Darius raises his hand and says, "Miss Murray, that's great, but I sit next to Luke, and so why can't I just help him when he needs help?"

And Miss Murray says, "Well Luke, you're not trained in craniosacral techniques... but neither am I, so... well, we'll see," is what she says.

I end up being in that same classroom the next Monday morning, and I observe: Luke is really struggling. I can tell he's breathing really loud. I'm nervous. I'm looking around for Miss Murray—where is she? And I notice that Luke—sorry, Darius—is writing like this, and all of a sudden looks over at Luke and puts a hand to the forehead that looks something like this.

And Luke's entire body calms down. And I'm like, oh my goodness. Darius's support was so effective. We didn't need Miss Murray to run over. It was—it was just a little human touch that was needed. And Darius was excited to do it. Luke received it really well. And Luke calmed down even better than he did before when Miss Murray did that.

And for me, we've got to remember that these incredible peers exist all the time in every classroom. They're ready to support, they're ready to help, and they're eager to do so.

And this particular picture makes me laugh because this started in class with support and ended with a really good friendship. The two of them took off on Halloween and ended up getting more candy than any other kids in the neighborhood.

And Darius said it was all because of Luke's stroller or wheelchair—because there was a section where they could keep all the candy in it. So they ran as fast as they could through the neighborhood. Luke had the best time of his life apparently, according to his mom, and the two of them had a blast on Halloween.

And I think one of the things that we want families to know and understand is that relationships are at the key to all of this work. We care very much that all kids have friendships and connections with other students in their community, in school.

So then you might say, well, how do we start to promote friendships? And sometimes people think, well, we have to have, you know, social skills training. But, you know, any of you that had a preschooler or have a preschool-age child, you probably had social goals or have social goals on their IEP.

But the research shows that regardless of the preschool experience, regardless of what we put on IEP goals, most kids come to kindergarten and don't have this ability to form friendships.

I would argue as an adult I struggle to form friendships because we haven't really intentionally taught humans how to form important relationships and how to maintain them.

So we have some research that uses this High Five model—meaning each finger (not the hand model, but still your hand)—that each finger on your hand represents a different research or evidence-based practice for teaching kids about friendship.

So, like, we'll just do like an example that the thumb—when parents and grandparents and teachers tell kids and show kids why helping one another, about friendships, and, like, we tell each other—like Julie and I are co-teachers and we tell each other like, "Oh right, we got to talk to our kids about why friendships are important," or we talk about our friendship as co-teachers and we say to kids, "Oh, Julie and I are working through this," or "Julie and I, you know, had to make up from a fight last night," or whatever.

That when we talk to kids about the importance of friendship, or like how much joy Julie brings to my life—talking about that to kids actually is an evidence-based practice that helps kids form friendships. So just

telling them and showing them why friendships are important—like, that's so simple, but it's an evidence-based practice that will serve them across their life.

The number one place for kids to develop friendships is in general education classrooms with general education peers because they're going to be surrounded by kids who have language models, behavioral models, academic models, and they can support each other to learn these skills really effectively.

Well, the pinky finger, I'll just add—which is what Miss Murray did in the story with Luke and Darius—is she said, "Yeah, I guess, Darius, you can support Luke." And all she had to do is give that permission. And all of a sudden, Luke is providing cranial sacral support, and now we're having positive peer-to-peer interactions. And it's just by saying, "Sure, that sounds fine," or "Give it a shot."

And of course supporting when needed, but here it was just really, really natural. Students—kids—know how to include others quite well. It's adults that often get in the way.

So we want to think about that support isn't always needed or wanted. So we might sit at an IEP meeting or we might go, "Have you seen my kid? They need support!" So sometimes it goes—you know, like we've already talked about—the unintended consequences.

But let's just talk about the jumping to thinking there needs to be support. And then we're going to talk about fading support as we wind down this session.

So we wanted to really think about the assumptions that are being made. A lot of times we as parents are like, "Oh, I'm scared they won't be safe. I'm scared they won't be blah blah blah." But essentially what we've got to do is really think about: when support is needed, and when isn't it needed?

Because too often, it's not needed—and it ends up doing more harm than good.

The other thing is we've got to avoid jumping in to solve problems for kids, because then they don't know how to solve them on their own. They become too dependent. You've all seen it—when adults don't respect the student's space or preferences, we'll see big behaviors here.

And so instead it's like, let's think of a support that is less intrusive. These are things we want to do because support isn't always needed.

And I'm just going to read this cartoon for you because this is really common: This is a paraprofessional, and she is working hard on an art project. And the student is saying, "But when do I get a turn?" And it says, “After only two months as a teaching assistant, Gladys finds her spelling has improved, her math skills are honed, and she has discovered she has artistic ability.”

The concept being: too often, as adults, we over-support because we want to do a good job. And in reality, the way to do a good job is to make sure that kids are the drivers of that support—and it is a lot less support than we think.

Remember, support is a verb. And a lot of times that verb is about fading.

So the very last idea we have for you today is fading. So Kristie, do you want to explain this?

Yeah. And this is one place where the team really needs to get on the same page. Because if somebody's busy fading and somebody else is thinking we need to provide more support, then we're kind of at odds. And somebody's like, "Are you doing your job?" or "Is my kid getting the support they need?"

So this needs to be very much a conversation about: okay, which activities, where can we see where a student can be more independent? Or maybe where peers can provide that support? In which ways?

We've said this a different way, multiple different ways, but: how can it be more natural or more invisible? So it's not that it's gone—it's just not so obvious.

When will you be able to talk about creating opportunities where, okay, we can do something with materials? What about if we said, okay, is there like more opportunities for choice—and that's the actual support? Or that the student, your child, gets to decide which type of support?

So it's like a choice of supports.

And then we always want to think about how are we ensuring self-advocacy, a sense of agency? So again, where can the student sort of advocate for their own wishes? What would work best for them? Versus all the adults who may be sat around the table making those initial decisions.