

The physical therapist's role in school inclusion during early childhood education

Early childhood education is very important for sensory, cognitive and motor development. However, early childhood education involves not only basic care, but represents a change – from living only in the family environment to an increase of social ties¹. In the first five years of life, most part of the sensory, cognitive and motor learning occurs (remaining for the next stages of life)². Thus, it is essential for healthcare professionals to have special attention at this moment³.

The first years of life bring great challenges for families and healthcare and education professionals, particularly when the child does not present typical development, i.e., when delays in the sensory, cognitive and motor performance are observed. In this situation, we have three essential factors: (1) getting to know the child's skills and the difficulties, (2) planning activities to improve the present condition and stimulate new learning and (3) working together, with the participation of and information exchange among children, families and healthcare and education professionals⁴.

Physical therapy as a mean to stimulate the inclusion of children with disabilities in the school environment is recent. To be more participative, physical therapists must know the rights of these children. However, one must bear in mind that school enrollment is just the first step. It is important to make several visits to evaluate the school environment and detect possible barriers and plan solutions. Moreover, physical therapists should analyze school activities, to better understand the skills being developed, possible challenges in the students' interaction and ways to minimize these difficulties. Finally, they must hold meetings with the school staff, other healthcare professionals and families to establish the goals.

Physical therapists should work with other professionals to establish guidelines and specific modifications for the transportation of children with disabilities (regular or school bus), to stimulate the acceptance of students

with disabilities by their peers and professionals, planning projects for accessibility in recreational areas, collaborating with physical education teachers to develop inclusive motor development programs, participating in various prevention activities, and the creation of screening programs for musculoskeletal changes and guidance programs professionals, parents and students⁴.

Frequently, physical therapists are the connection among healthcare and education communities. They can provide information on various conditions, conduct/interpret reports, improve communication between healthcare and education professionals and assist in the access to health resources. They can also provide education professionals information on interventions for children with disabilities^{5,6}. In addition, it is essential to focus on the interests/questions of educators to structure more effective programs⁷. Educators may present, for instance, questions about specific students' disabilities or necessary adaptations in the classroom and referrals.

Working together, with the participation of children, families and health and education professionals is crucial to the child to have the best development. Access to information, through intersectoral dialogue, encourages reflection and helps preventing prejudice and discrimination. Laws and public policies guide and guarantee access to education – a right of every child.

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