

## **Kids with Special Needs and the Role of Early Childhood Educators**

Kids with special needs are the delight of many early childhood educators. These kids unique characters, traits and physical needs push staff to creatively adapt themselves, environments and indeed entire communities in order to best facilitate healthy development.

Whole fields of work have emerged over the years, focusing attention on a multitude of aspects that contribute to the positive growth of kids with special needs. It wasn't so long ago that kids with special needs were shunted off behind closed doors, to be cared for in a kind of maintenance sort of way. Now there are movements afoot, such as integration, which seek to include kids in mainstream settings for socialization. Other movements concentrate on environmental factors, such as reducing barriers or providing adaptive play equipment or the political arena to bring about change in social policy to facilitate better service.

Early childhood educators rise to the challenge posed by kids with special needs. Each child is like a unique jigsaw puzzle requiring an individualized approach to unlock the door to the most fruitful advancement. The educators' reward for their labor is measured in smiles, a few words spoken, eye contact, a newly achieved self-care skill and sometimes just a hug.

However, the single most important aspect of an early childhood educator's role is pretty much never spoken. It is interweaved and critical to every aspect of their work, yet there remains no reference to it anywhere.

What's so special about working with kids with special needs and the work of the early childhood educator?

These children are unable to protect their own dignity and thus the most important aspect of an

early childhood educator's role is as the guardian of these kids' dignity.

It is not just that these kids cannot protect and fend for themselves, for if this were all that mattered, solutions are easy. There is a more human and pressing concern for these kids.

Children with special needs must rely on the early childhood educator as guardians of their dignity.

It is not for independence sake that early childhood educators embark on multi-faceted lesson plans. Increased independence and autonomy are often quite achievable. Early childhood educators do what they do with kids with special needs because of a more profound mission. They seek to develop the children's sense of dignity, worth and value and if not in their eyes, then in the eyes of their community.

When early childhood educators teach life skills, when they improve behavior and when they develop socialization abilities, it is in the pursuit of this dignity. At heart, this is why early childhood educators do what they do.

Early childhood educators recognize the inherent worth and value of all human beings and seek to protect those who cannot protect themselves. With kids with special needs, they are protecting their dignity and at heart, this is what parents entrust them to do.

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