

Observing in Settings Serving Children with Special Needs—Birth to Five

All children benefit socially, emotionally, and academically from classrooms with high-quality teacher-child interactions, as measured by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System® (CLASS®). Meanwhile, additional guidance can enhance observations in classrooms with children from specific populations or in specific setting types. This job aid provides additional guidance for observing in special education (SPED) settings.

Observing in self-contained classrooms or inclusion classrooms that serve children with significant disabilities may be different from observing in classrooms that serve only a small percentage of children with mild disabilities—such as speech or language delays—where

the interactions they have with teachers tend to look quite similar to those that teachers have with typically developing children. Some inclusion classrooms serve children who have more significant learning needs—including autism and intellectual and physical disabilities—which may require specialized teaching strategies, materials, or adaptive equipment. Observers need to be mindful that this age range is when children are potentially showing signs of disabilities but have not yet received diagnoses. As a result, self-contained classrooms for children age three to age eight are most likely to serve children who are presenting with significant and apparent externalizations or observable indications of physical, social, emotional, or cognitive delay.

Similarities and Differences between General Education Classrooms and Special Education Classrooms¹

GENERAL EDUCATION CLASSROOMS (children with disabilities, typically mild disabilities)	SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSROOMS (self-contained or inclusive settings that serve children with more significant disabilities)
Generally one teacher and one assistant	Some or all children may have a 1:1 assistant
Larger teacher-child ratios	Smaller teacher-child ratios
Most children communicate verbally	Some children may use alternative methods of communication. Children who are verbal may have less advanced verbal skills than other children their age
Most children present with typical physical development	Some children may present with disabilities that require the use of wheelchairs or adaptive equipment (standing tables or special chairs)
Focus is on a general school-readiness curriculum	Focus will vary by students' individual education plan and may emphasize pre-academics as well as social and functional communication and life skills development (pointing or gesturing to communicate needs, basic choice-making, or self-help skills such as toileting or self-feeding)
Few, if any, children receive observable services such as physical, occupational, or speech therapy during school hours	Many children receive therapies. Therapies may take place in the room (push-in provisions) or elsewhere.
Most children share the same learning goals	Individual children may have very specific learning goals that differ within and between classrooms
Children may spend more time in facilitated centers or free play	Children may spend more time in 1:1 or small group instruction and play
Teachers use a variety of approaches for instruction, including whole group, small groups, and free play	Teachers may direct specialized strategies such as task analysis (breaking skills down into components and teaching each skill separately), system of least prompts (moving from least to most intrusive prompts), or errorless learning
Classroom-level behavior guidelines	Individualized behavior plans

¹ Most early childhood education programs are inclusive, meaning they include children with disabilities and children without disabilities together. This table represents a range of general education and inclusive classrooms serving a few children with milder special needs on the left and self-contained or inclusive classrooms serving children with more significant special needs on the right.

Recommended Best Practices for Observations

BEFORE THE OBSERVATION:

- Talk to the teacher in advance to learn about the number of children with disabilities, their characteristics, and the kinds of things they are learning. Specifically,
 - Ask about the developmental ages of the children to provide context for the interactions.
 - Ask if any children will receive therapies during your scheduled observation.
 - Obtain information about the different ways children communicate—such as signs, picture-exchange systems, pointing, or augmentative communication systems. If augmentative communication systems are in place, familiarize yourself with how these are used in classrooms.
- Observers who know in advance that children are at a lower developmental level should review typical child development in order to better understand how the teacher-child interactions might look. (See links at the end of this document.)
- Upon arrival, find out the names and roles of all of the adults who are present. This will help you weigh the interactions of these adults as discussed in the CLASS manual.
- Take time to watch the classroom before you begin the formal observation to get a sense of the classroom and the children. Waiting to start the observation will give children time to become familiar with the observer, thereby increasing the odds that the observation represents a typical day. However, guard against initial impressions that may affect your coding.
- Do not ask about the special education status of a child; rather, use the guidelines presented in this job aid to inform your observing and coding.

DURING THE OBSERVATION:

- Pay attention to methods of instruction:
 - There may be 1:1 assistants or therapists in the room. Weigh their interactions based on the number of children with whom each adult is working, the amount of time they spend with children, and their responsibility for instruction.
 - Some methods of instruction may be more directive than methods in a general education classroom. This does not mean that the classroom will necessarily score lower on CLASS.
 - Pay close attention to routines: Some instruction occurs during routines.
 - Note that teachers may be very explicit about learning objectives to ensure that children focus on the key aspects of the activity. (This strategy exemplifies effective teaching within the Pre-K CLASS dimension of Instructional Learning Formats.)
- Watch for scaffolding and individualized support:
 - Children may need additional wait time to formulate a response, especially if they use communication boards or other nonverbal methods of communication.
 - How does the teacher respond to challenging behaviors? Are her expectations clear and consistent? Does the teacher monitor children and attend to positive behaviors? Do her efforts help to reduce the problem behavior? (These questions concern the Toddler CLASS dimension of Behavior Guidance and the Pre-K CLASS dimension of Behavior Management.)
 - Observers need to take nonverbal communication and prompting by the teacher into account when considering communicative exchanges and feedback loops.
- Listen and watch for verbal/nonverbal communication:
 - Notice how children respond to adults' interactions, as their responses provide information about the appropriateness or success of an interaction.
 - Children may not always respond verbally, so observers need to look to see if the child responds in another manner (facial expressions, gestures, signs, pictures, pointing, or vocalizing).
 - Children with disabilities may not always respond to teachers' feedback with words, but they may respond nonverbally by pointing or gesturing. Teachers pick up on these cues and provide more information to build children's understanding. Feedback loops and conversations do not have to be entirely verbal. (These interactions fall under the Pre-K CLASS dimension of Quality of Feedback.)
 - Watch for teachers to label, use advanced language, and self- and parallel talk, as these strategies may be used more in classrooms serving children with disabilities.

WHILE CODING:

- Some children in special education classrooms may function at a level below their chronological age. Remember that the descriptions in the CLASS manual provide examples of what interactions may look like for each dimension and indicator. However, these are not the only way interactions play out. Focus on the intent of the dimension and indicators by referring to the definition on the face page and the key words in the manual. Ask yourself if the interactions meet that intent.

Resources about Child Development

- ▶ [CDC's Developmental Milestones](#)
- ▶ [Child Development: Ages and Stages](#)

SPECIAL EDUCATION JOB AID

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