Robin Barlak teaches special education at First Step Preschool in Ohio’s Parma City Schools. She teaches children with a variety of disabilities—autism, speech and language delays, ADHD and other severe behavior disorders, physical and developmental handicaps.

The First Step Preschool program is based on the following guidelines:

A. Learning is developmental.

   Children are provided the opportunity to learn at their own pace and with valuable hands-on experiences.

B. Children can learn through play.

   Ample play experiences are provided to develop decision-making abilities that integrate language, cognitive, social, adaptive, and motor skills.

C. Self-concept is critical.

   Parents and staff work together to encourage children’s efforts and accomplishments and to motivate their love of learning.

Robin’s students are 3- to 5-year-olds. Each of her classes can have up to eight special needs students and four “typically developing peer” children who serve as role models. A typically developing peer is a youngster without identified disabilities who provides social interaction and motivation for preschoolers with special needs. Because all children learn from watching and interacting with others, typically developing peer models are an important part of First Step Preschool.

The Need for Structure

More than any other group, special education students need structure. All effective classrooms have structure. Without a consistent set of procedures, special education students can be put in at-risk situations. They like a consistent set of daily routines because it makes life familiar and friendly.

Preschool Procedures

After hearing Harry speak and reading The First Days of School, Robin says, “I constantly think of procedures throughout the school day.”

To establish a consistent structure for her students, these are the procedures that Robin teaches the first day of school:

1. The students come into the classroom and are assigned a locker. They take off their coats and book bags and place them in their lockers. The lockers have different colored nametags with a different picture on each nametag so each child can discriminate which one is theirs.
2. When the children play, Robin gives them a “two-minute warning” before clean-up time. She gives a separate warning to autistic children, who need time for transition. Robin starts to sing the “Clean Up” song. The students, along with the adults, put the toys on the shelves. This procedure helps the children understand what cleaning up means.

3. The children sit on the carpet for circle time. Each child has an assigned place. After a few days, they know where their places are and when circle time is ready to begin. Robin sings the same opening circle song daily. The children sing along, and then they are ready to participate in circle time.

4. There is also a schedule within the circle time. The circle time schedule is consistent and the students like the consistency of the routine. During circle time, activities include calendar, weather, story, song, and game, concluding with going to the gym.

5. After circle time, the children line up along the wall and walk to the gym in a quiet fashion. This procedure is taught on the first day. If a child forgets the procedure, Robin simply says, “Remember the procedure.”

6. In the gym, she alerts the children when there are two minutes left to play and she shows them where to line up. Distinctive feet are painted on the gym floor so the children have a specific place to line up.

7. Then the children go back to the classroom for hand-washing and snack time. They form a line and Robin puts soap on each child’s hands, then helps rinse and dry them. The children then go to their assigned seats. Once all the children are seated, the class sings the snack song and the teachers disperse the food to each child.

8. The children can ask for more juice and/or snacks using their words or a picture communication board. The children discard their cups and napkins and sit on the carpet to look at books.

9. The children are then ready for small-group time. Three children go to the computer with the classroom assistant. Four children do a table or floor activity with the teacher and four children do an activity by themselves (sandbox, blocks, Play Dough®, etc.). After ten minutes, the children switch groups. They know the routine and rotation of switching groups after a week. This sets the stage for cooperative learning and working together.

10. To prepare for going home, the children get their coats and book bags and place them on the carpet. The teacher, classroom assistants, and older preschoolers help the younger or more physically challenged preschoolers with fastening coats and boots.

11. They sing the “Goodbye Song” and the children line up to go home.

Throughout the class time, Robin uses many visuals, gestures, pictures, and objects to transition the students from one place to another. These procedures are taught and reinforced daily. Regardless of their individual special needs, each child benefits from the procedures.

Robin says, “Teaching special education is very rewarding because these children are special angels. Procedures make learning enjoyable for teachers, classroom assistants, therapists, students, and parents.”