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## Recognizing Special Needs Learners

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**Abstract:** *Special needs learners are learners with peculiar conditions that make them unable to benefit from curricular programmes in the same way other children do except they are given specialized services and support. The presence of this children in the midst of normal once should not be over looked. They need to be attended to and appreciated. When a child has been identified as a special needs learner, he/she should be made to undergo some intervention programmes to assist him or her adjust as much as possible to be able to learn. At the end of the intervention programme, and after due assessment, it is expected that the learner be properly placed for continuation of learning, attending to them based on their peculiar needs in such a way that they are able to benefit from curricular programmes and grow up to be functional members of the society. The paper recommends among others that children should be observed closely afterbirth and during the early years of growing up so as to nip-in-the-bud any abnormal development and its effect on the child. Early identification should be followed by early intervention programmes so as to alter as much as possible any negative development and its effect on the child. This will also assist the child develop coping mechanisms very early in life and demystify the trauma associated with the condition. Teachers and relevant agencies should be sensitive to the needs of these category of learners in the educational setting by making provisions that will enable them benefit optimally from the curriculum. For example, Walk-ways, classroom structures and instructional materials should be special needs friendly.*

**Key words:** *identification, intervention, placement, nurturing and special needs learners*

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### Introduction

Human growth and development vary from individual to individual, while some are normal with rapid progress others may be slow with variations, some others may have developmental problems which may lead to disorders resulting to physical, mental or emotional disability. These disorders which lead to disabilities are the factors that are responsible for learning difficulties in such individuals. When children have developmental and learning difficulties, they will require special learning methods, environment, materials and teachers to make them learn what other children learn normally with conventional teaching-learning resources. This explains why they are called special needs learners and the education given to them is called special education.

To recognize means to acknowledge or take notice of in some definite way and with a show of appreciation. Recognizing special needs learners means to notice their presence by paying attention to their needs and appreciating them in their peculiar circumstance. Every child is unique and deserves to be treated as such but special needs learners have peculiar challenges

that make them deserve thorough handling in terms of teaching and learning to enable them attain their potentials. In order to get this done such children will have to be identified, given intervention programmes, placed properly and then nurtured adequately. This paper will discuss these activities needed for children with special needs under the following sub-headings:

- Special needs learners
- Identification of children with special needs
- Intervention for children with special needs
- Placement of children with special needs
- Nurturing children with special needs
- Recommendations
- Conclusion

### **Special needs learners**

A learner is one who is able to gain knowledge or understanding of a skill, instruction or experience. Special needs learners therefore as the name implies are learners with peculiar or abnormal characteristics that make them unable to gain knowledge or understanding of a skill or instruction the way others do except they are given specialized services and support. This means that they need special education. FRN (2013) defines Special Education as a customized educational programme designed to meet the needs of persons with special needs that the general education programme cannot cater for. General education as referred is the regular, conventional curriculum used in teaching normal children without special teaching methods or supports. Special needs learners are not only learners who have one disability or the other in any part of the body that hinder the normal learning and assimilation process but also gifted and behaviour faulted learners.

Gifted and talented Learners exhibit peculiar distinctive intellectual prowess or have extraordinary intellectual abilities and may not find normal classroom operations interesting and this may affect their ability to fully benefit from classroom teaching/learning. These group of learners though always very few, have special need deserve special handling. Therefore they also fall under Special needs learners though on the desired lane but the term "special education" is generally used to specifically indicate instruction of students with disabilities or learning difficulties. Learners who have behavioural problems need behaviour modification therapy before they would be able to learn in a normal classroom. For the sake of this paper we shall be looking at Special needs learners who have one disability or the other in any part of the body that hinder the normal learning and assimilation process.

### **Identification of Children with special needs**

Gunewardene (2014), who has been the founder of a home for special needs learners for 43 years testify that years of experience has taught her that detecting difficulties in development in a child's life and providing the necessary help during early childhood made a significant

difference in minimizing the adverse effect of these conditions. Identifying children with special needs is the beginning of the solution to the needs of children with disabilities or learning difficulties.

There are broadly two major groups of special needs learners, which are: (i) Children with identified disability who require special education services, or other specialized services and supports and (ii) Children without identified conditions but require specialized attention and monitoring. These second group of children may not have a specific physical disabilities but are children whose behavior, intelligence and social development affect their ability to learn.

Sometimes it could be difficult to know which child has special needs at a glance or by first contact but there are certain blue prints that could be used to detect such children. The following can serve as a guide to identifying a special needs learner:

- i. Not being able to perform developmental task meant for ones age e.g not walking, teething or speaking as and when due.
- ii. Has physical or mental impairment, e.g. visual, speech, and hearing impairments;
- iii. Has abnormal physical features e.g the hands looking bent, poorly shaped head tilting to one direction.
- iv. Smiles unusually and unable to control liquids from the mouth.
- v. Has problems in attention control/ attention difficulties
- vi. Has a disabling condition or an established medical disability, such as autism, deaf blindness, deafness, mental retardation, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, serious emotional disturbance.
- vii. Has specific learning disability, due to established medical condition e.g. traumatic brain injury.
- viii. Cannot carry out simply task or answer simply questions.
- ix. Has disruptive behavior disorder.
- x. Has social and emotional difficulties
- xi. Restless and unable to learn.
- xii. Has learning difficulty/ intellectual disability

The Federal government of Nigeria in her national policy on education recognized the following as conditions that require special education: visual impairment, hearing impairment, physical and health impairment, intellectual disability, emotional and behavioural disorders (hyperactive, hypoactive/socially maladjusted), speech and language impairment, learning disabilities, the gifted and talented, and albinos (FRN,2013).

#### **Intervention for Children with special needs:**

Intervention is a concept which applies to children who are discovered at a young age to have special educational needs which may affect their development (Silas, 2005). When a child is identified as having some deficiencies or abnormality that could hinder intellectual development, the first thing to do is to proffer remedial or intervention programmes. These efforts are to assist in the modification of the condition and improve the functioning of the intellect. Deusdedi (2011), affirms that early identification of children's developmental and learning problems and prompt referral for assessment helps us understand and support the

children's conditions and needs in development and learning.

It is needful to detect the problem in time and avail the child of early intervention programme. Early Intervention is aimed at reducing the effects of a child's condition on their development and education.

Raina (2015), the director of a multidisciplinary therapy centre attest that each child needs attention and the earlier parents bring in their children, better chances of them improving. If parents bring them when they are 2-year-old, it is easier to cover up by 4 years. Incorrect behaviour takes a lot of time to be corrected.

There are certain core features which must be considered for a successful implementation of an intervention programme. They are: (1) Intervention has to take place when the child is still young and especially when the child is at a pre-school age. (2) The child's parents must be involved. For example, if parents are able to learn to deal with their child's needs early on they will be better able to implement the child's programme at home. (3) Intervention has to be intense, structured and consistent.

Early Intervention may be by the use of one-on-one support or direct or indirect therapy for the child, such intervention services can include: Special lesson/instruction Speech Therapy, Physical Therapy, Nutrition, Social Work, Family Education, Vision Services and so on.

### **Reasons for early intervention therapy**

The following reasons are given by Silas (2005) for early intervention.

- **To enhance the child's development:** human development is most rapid at the very tender ages, when the organs and tissues of the body are just assuming their functions and still receiving inputs to get stable. So it is with the child's learning capacity, the condition could be salvaged if it is identified and followed up. Without Early Intervention the child may miss out during the short period of time when the opportunity to develop and learn is most acute.
- **To provide support to the family:** Early Intervention is also important for a child's family. The additional stress which can be caused by having a child with special educational needs often affects the whole family's wellbeing. Early Intervention often leads to parents changing their attitude towards their child and becoming better able to deal with their child's behaviour pattern. It also means that as the child develops and his or her special needs become less pronounced the family will have more time for leisure activities and also more time to spend with the other children.
- **To maximize the child's contribution to society:** Finally, by intervening early, wider society will also theoretically reap the benefits later. It is suggested that the child's increased development will go hand-in-hand with a decreased inter-dependence upon social institutions in later life and may even enhance the child's potential future employment opportunities.

The need for early intervention cannot be overemphasized as this is the best way to nip in the bud the effects of emerging negative health development that could hamper normal growth

and development and subsequent contribution to the social and economic development of a an individual to the society. It also saves cost because early intervention often does not take huge medical bills that may be required in future to handle the same condition. Time and the stress that could have been used in running around when the condition might have aggravated would be saved as a result of early intervention.

### **Placement of children with special needs**

When a child has been identified as being in need of special education or as a special needs learner, he/she is made to undergo some intervention programmes to assist him or her adjust as much as possible to be able to learn. At the end of the intervention programme, and after due assessment, it is expected that the learner be properly placed for continuation of learning. Using the words of Deusdedi (2011), educational placement is the overall instructional setting in which the student receives his education. Iheanacho and Osuroji (2009) assert that the original place of the child with special needs is in the regular classroom, therefore no condition should be allowed to remove him from that environment. Once the special needs learner has been through the intervention programme successfully, he/she has to be placed where the conventional curriculum will be implemented.

Some range of options for placing them in a regular school are as follows:

- A regular class with indirect support provided by the teacher
- A regular class with resource assistance provided by a special education teacher
- A regular class with withdrawal assistance for part of the day
- A special education class with partial integration into a regular class
- A special education class full time.

A student can also be placed in a specialized school for the blind, deaf, or for severe disabilities, or in a residential facility that provides an environment and health care appropriate to the student's condition. Here are some educational settings a special needs child could have:

- **Mainstream (also referred to as General or Inclusive Education):** Many students receive special education and related services in a general education classroom where peers without disabilities also spend their days. This is called inclusion. Some services that a student might receive in a mainstream setting include: direct instruction, a helping teacher, team teaching, co-teaching, an interpreter, education aides, modifications or accommodations in lessons or instruction, or more teachers per student.
- **Resource:** This is a class for students who receive special education services and need intensive help to keep up with grade-level work. The class may have 1 or 2 students, or may have many students. However, students receive instruction or support based on their unique needs.
- **Self-Contained Programmes:** This is a general term for placements for which the student needs to receive services outside of the general education classroom for half of the

school day or more. an example is the private lesson organized within our environment but has to be based on a student's unique needs, not on the disability alone.

- Life Skills: This helps students with many different types of disabilities but generally those who need support with academic, social, or behavioral issues as well as daily living skills (CAR, 2016). Sometimes students with disabilities could be gifted in so many skills that are rare and much needed in the society. A little exposure, training and assistance could mean a lot to them in particular and to the society in general.

### **Nurturing:**

Nurturing means to supply nourishment to further the development of a living organism. Nurturing children with special needs therefore would mean attending to them based on their peculiar needs in such a way that they are able to benefit from curricular programmes. This implies a continuum of supply of services, activities and facilities that enhance the learning ability of special needs learners. It also implies that after placement, the intervention programme will be sustained by nurturing, otherwise the benefit may be temporal. For instance if a child was identified with learning difficulty as a result of a brain trauma, with the assistance of the parents the child goes through medical and psychological therapy, that child needs to be nurtured continuously with good nutrition, education, emotional encouragement and social acquaintance.

Mainstreaming is one major aspect of nurturing that involves the teacher and other relevant education agencies. They should be sensitive to the peculiar needs of these group of learners by making sure that the instructional environment and materials are suitable to them also. Walk-ways to the classroom should be such that wheel chairs could roll through for those who use them and other such responsive innovations to meet special needs.

Nurturing also requires helping them to acquire life skills that would make them self-reliant so they could earn a living like any other person in the society. Those of them who require some physical aids to function should be given. Such aids could be wheel chairs, hearing aids, Braille, crutches and financial empowerment to assist them get started in life.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the discussion in the study it is recommended that:

- ❖ Children should be observed closely afterbirth and during the early years of growing up so as to nip-in-the-bud any abnormal development and its effect on the child.
- ❖ Teachers should be involved in the identification of special needs child since they spend most hours of the day with the children.
- ❖ Early identification should be followed by early intervention strategies or programmes so as to alter as much as possible any negative development and its effect on the child. This will also assist the child develop coping mechanisms very early in life and demystify the trauma associated with the condition.
- ❖ Mainstreaming or inclusive education should be encouraged to enable the special needs child socialize and get the warmth of other members of the family.

- ❖ Teachers and relevant agencies should be sensitive to the needs of these category of learners in the educational setting by making provisions that will enable them benefit optimally from the curriculum eg. Walk-ways, classroom structures and instructional materials should be special needs friendly.
- ❖ The family and society should provide physical and financial aids to special needs graduates from schools to assist them live independent and sustainable lives.

### **Conclusion**

Learners who have physical or intellectual disabilities that make learning difficult or almost impossible require special aids and attention to be able to learn. Such learners are called special needs learners. Some disabilities are observable from birth, others unfold as the child grows, but the ability to identify the presence of symptoms of abnormality in the child will go along way to getting the problem solved. Intervention strategies doled out to parents by professionals will alleviate the consequences of the condition or totally reverse it. Placing the child properly where he/she will receive education and nurturing for personal development and socialization needs to be done diligently. Special needs children have potentials and a future like others, all they need is responsive support and service.

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