

“But That’s Not Fair!”

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If you have children, I’m sure you’ve heard this expression before. Even as adults there may be times when we think, “That’s not fair”. Some of us may even say it out-loud. All of us are aware that some things in life aren’t fair; but we have to learn to live and thrive with whatever set of circumstances we have been given.

Let’s take a look at fairness from the perspective of teaching children. When you are teaching do you try to make everything as fair as possible? If so, how do you do this? Do your children (students) show jealousy if a sibling or another student has different expectations for a certain project than herself/himself? Do they compare their strengths and weaknesses to one another? Do they want everything to be equal – exactly the same? I hope I’m not the only mother that has these problems from time to time. Take a minute to think about the following quote from Rick Lavoie, author and advocate for students with learning differences.

“Fair doesn’t mean giving every child the same thing. It means giving every child what they need.”

Most often, children understand fair to mean equal or exactly the same. If Timmy gets 12 M&M’s then Cara will count hers to make sure she gets exactly 12 M&M’s too. Children don’t want to be treated differently (unless it’s in their favor) from their siblings because they view this as being treated unfairly. This is part of human nature. Beyond M&M’s, children need to be told that they are unique and special individuals worthy of love AND different treatment. There is no person exactly like them and that is exactly why they will have different treatment from time to time. Things may not be perfectly equal...but they will be fair.

So what does this have to do with accommodations? Accommodations are essential for students with learning disabilities and executive functioning deficits. Executive functioning deficits overlap with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) symptoms and include difficulty with organization, time management, completing tasks, etc. When children and adults have a good understanding that fair does not mean equal it becomes easier to use accommodations to support their learning. I’ve run into situations where students have such high expectations for themselves and how they want others to view them that they emotionally and mentally burn out because they refuse to be treated differently (fairly) through using accommodations. The opposite can be true as well. Some students don’t push themselves hard enough and take advantage by asking for too many accommodations. As parents and educators, knowing your child’s personality and learning needs is key when considering how to support their learning. When

you've identified an area that your child struggles with ask yourself these four questions.

1. "What is the end goal or learning objective?"
2. "What baby steps (short term objectives) can we take to get there?"
3. "Are there extra steps we can get rid of that aren't meaningful to the learning?"
4. "Is there anything we can do differently to make the journey smoother?"

Academic accommodations make learning accessible to students who have learning and attention struggles. You can individualize student instruction through the use of accommodations and still maintain fair treatment and high standards of performance. With accommodations children are still expected to learn the same material, but have a different way of getting, using, or presenting the information. On a side note, many people think that modifications are the same as accommodations. Modifications are different. In short, modifications are when students are expected to learn less, more, or different information from their grade level peers.

If you have a child who struggles in certain areas, use the reference sheet below to help you develop an accommodation plan. Start by teaching your child that everyone learns differently because no two people are exactly the same. This can be framed as part of what makes us unique. Teach them that with every learning difference there are also strengths. How can they use their strengths to showcase their learning? Get them excited about trying new "tricks" to make learning more interesting and less frustrating. Then try a few different accommodations, see how they work, ask your child what he/she thinks of them, and decide if it's a good fit. Help your children go from frustration to success armed with the knowledge and understanding that fair does not mean equal.

If you have accommodations that have been successful in your household, I'd love to hear from you. Feel free to email me your success stories with accommodations!

About Kelly

Kelly Steinke, M.A. Ed., NBCT is the founder of READ Learning Educational Services, LLC. Kelly taught special education, primarily to students with learning disabilities, for over 15 years in the Midwest, East Coast, and Pacific Northwest. During this time she became a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT) in Exceptional Needs, earned a Master of Arts Degree in Education (Administration and Leadership), and founded her company, READ Learning Educational Services, LLC. For the past six years, Kelly has served the community as a dyslexia specialist.

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