

Rivka's Story: Developmental Approaches to Support and Intervention

Rivka is a cheerful and friendly 6-year-old at Maplewood Elementary. She is one of the younger children in first grade (she has a July birthday). In kindergarten, Rivka missed her reading benchmark by two levels, placing her in the bottom 10% of students for reading. In math, she is on grade level with extra support. Rivka lives with both her mother and father and has two younger siblings, ages 3 and 1. Rivka's parents are natives of Ukraine but have lived in the United States for many years, and Rivka did not qualify for ESOL services. However, she does code-switch and use both Ukrainian and Russian with relatives and with friends in her church. Rivka often acts younger than her peers in first grade, running away from nonpreferred tasks, sitting on the floor instead of her chair, fidgeting more, and playing and laughing at inappropriate times. She is easily offended if a peer says something critical; her teachers report she bursts into tears once or twice per week. Rivka's parents report no stressors at home, and she appears healthy and well cared for.

Rivka's teacher wanted to refer her to the school counselor, but a meeting with colleagues on the first-grade team convinced her to wait. Instead, she pairs Rivka with carefully matched, positive peer buddies, gives her plenty of wait time and positive reinforcement, and follows nonpreferred tasks with highly preferred ones to increase motivation. She has begun to ignore inappropriate laughing and uses positive reinforcement of on-task behavior to reduce instances of inappropriate playing. Rivka receives reading intervention each day, provided during the school's enrichment/intervention block. In this intervention, students remain in the general classroom and receive small-group, multisensory support with phonics, vocabulary, and listening comprehension. Rivka's progress is tracked carefully with short reading probes that take no more than 2 or 3 minutes to administer, allowing her intervention teacher to devote most of the time to instruction.

Rivka's story demonstrates steps a culturally responsive, developmentally aware team of professionals might take to improve a student's performance while remaining aware of their progress to avoid overlooking genuine disabilities. Note that Rivka, who is young for her age and lives with two younger siblings, demonstrates behaviors that are not atypical for 4- and 5-year-old children. Rather than immediately characterizing these behaviors as "problems," her teachers have instituted several supports, ranging from positive social interventions (peer buddy and positive reinforcement) to academic intervention compatible with different learning styles and students' need for flexibility. At the same time, though, Rivka's progress is carefully tracked, with academic assessments occurring regularly and ongoing team discussions to ensure her needs are appropriately addressed. With these supports and monitoring in place, it is reasonable to assume that either Rivka will catch up with her peers in the next year with no ill effects, or her teachers will be aware if her needs become more intense or her behaviors more disruptive.