

## ROLE PLAY

This activity was adapted from The Special Role of Social Services in Serving Families of Children with Handicapping Conditions by Marilyn Bartlett, Linda Kjerland, Judith Rothschild, and Ruth Drophin, New York University Resource Access Project, School of Continuing Education, 3 Washington Square Village, New York, NY, 10012.

### ROLE PLAY:

Select six people whom you feel will be comfortable in a role play. Assign the roles of mother, father, child with special needs, sibling, teacher, and therapist. Distribute cue cards to the appropriate players.

Take the players aside and tell them that you will signal them when it is time for them to join the group. Ask them to try to reflect in their posture and pace the feelings they experience or imagine as the story is narrated. At certain times they will be given blocks, representing the impact of events. As they receive the blocks, the impact should show in their movements. They should form a circle with right hands raised and clasped together, and left hand extended out flat to receive blocks.

Explain that the purpose of this activity is to increase their understanding and empathy for the effects a child with disabilities may have on the family. The class should listen, observe, and then discuss the role play.

### NARRATION:

1. I'd like you to meet a family. (Gesture to actors in roles of mother and father. Have them come forward, then introduce them, using their names.) Some years ago, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ were married.
2. After a period of adjustment during which you were getting used to each other, life was relatively uncomplicated; there was time for one another, and for establishing a home and a lifestyle together. During the second year of your marriage, you discovered you were going to have a baby. Great preparations were made in joyful anticipation of the arrival of the baby.
3. In your new identity as parents, you were proud to announce the arrival of Joanne. (Gesture to welcome the sibling to the circle.) Everyone, especially friends and relatives, was elated and shared your happiness. Life was now different; Mother, you took a six-month leave from work; Father, you took on added chores at home.
4. In about two years, you decided to have another baby. You would have liked a boy this time, but when asked about your preference, you replied, "Oh, it really doesn't matter, as long as it's healthy." Your second child was born, but this time, instead of happy smiling faces, you found that the doctors and nurses seemed to be avoiding you. There was much talking in hushed tones outside the hospital door. (Gesture for the child with disabilities to join the circle.)

5. (Raise your voice, pronouncing each word as emphatically as possible.) This child was disabled. Friends and relatives didn't know whether to offer congratulations or sympathy.
6. Remember those thoughts you had about what this baby would look like? Like all parents, you dreamed your child would be perfect. Now you must face the fact that this dream can never be realized. Here's a symbol for that realization. (Give mother and father each a block.)
7. Family: With a child who is different, all of you will go through many periods of adjustment and change in your lives. As you try to deal with these changes, there will be times that are rough, times that bring burdens and yet times that bring pleasure and satisfaction. Here's a symbol for those changes. (Give each family member a block.)
8. Mother: It doesn't take long for you to learn about attitudes toward children with handicaps. The reactions right after Joey's birth told the story, not joy, but stammered explanations, embarrassment, and awkwardness felt by everyone. You remember the great feelings you had in presenting Joanne to the world. There is something not quite right about presenting Joey. Here's a symbol for those feelings of turbulence, upset, and guilt. (Hand one block to the mother.)
9. Father: You, too, experience some uncomfortable feelings about presenting Joey to the world. Here is a symbol for the angry feelings you have. (Place a block in the father's hand.) The added medical, equipment, and transportation costs have forced you to take an additional job. Here is a symbol of that extra burden. (Place a block in his hand.)
10. Mother: This time you are unable to return to work, even though you want to. (Hand mother a block.) You are busy all day with chores and the children, especially Joey, who needs so much attention, so much work, so much thought. When your husband comes home, he is in a hurry to eat and get to his second job; he has little time to share your thoughts and worries. Here's a symbol for those extra burdens. (Give mother another block.)
11. Joanne: Since Joey was born, a great deal has been expected of you: to put up with parents who are tired or short-tempered; to deal with embarrassment, worries, and confusion. Here's a symbol for your feelings. (Hand a block to Joanne.)
12. Joey: You are exposed to many frustrations and humiliations that the normal child is not. You know that you are different, and feel sad that you seem to be the focus of so much attention and the cause of so many problems. You have to cope with many unusual situations. Here's a block for that. (Give Joey the block.)

14. **Mother and Father:** You seem to have little time together; you are continually busy with Joey, his appointments and needs. In fact, there is little time left for anyone else. Both of you feel so lonely. This block symbolizes that loneliness. (Give each parent another block.)
15. **Joanne:** You find that your parents have much less time to attend to your needs. You feel angry at Joey for taking them away, and guilty about your angry feelings. This block symbolizes your loneliness and difficult feelings. (Hand Joanne a block.) You find you must help more around the house, which takes you away from any time with your friends. Joey seems to always need something. Here is a symbol of that burden. (Hand Joanne another block.)
16. **Mother and Father:** In an effort to ease some of your responsibilities, you enroll Joey in preschool three mornings a week. (Gesture for the teacher to enter the circle.) The teacher may be able to help you learn what to do to better assist Joey. She will also allow Mom some time away from him.
17. **Teacher:** While you are excited to have a child with special needs in your class for the first time, you find that you are unprepared to deal with his problems. You now seem to have less time for the other children and experience frustration because of his presence. (Hand the teacher a block.) The other children ask many questions about Joey that you can't answer. They ignore him because they sense your growing frustration and because they don't understand him. (Hand the teacher another block.) What's worse, Joey's needs clearly are not being met in your classroom. You have a sense that they could be, but you just don't have the necessary expertise. (Hand teacher another block.)
18. **Joey:** You were excited to go to school, but now you must deal with classmates who tease or ignore you and a teacher who doesn't seem to know what to do with you and who sometimes gets mad at you just because you can't do things like the other children. (Hand Joey a block.)
19. **Teacher:** You turn to outside help for assistance with the problem. You refer Joey for physical therapy and soon find a therapist. (Cue the physical therapist to enter.) She is a great help to Joey, but she works outside the classroom, so you don't know what she's doing. Also, she now expects you to work with him individually each day on specially prescribed activities. You want to do it, but you can't afford the time. (Hand a block to the teacher.) The therapist also asks the parents to do exercises with him at home. They are helpful to Joey, and she expects them to be done for one-half hour each day. It is a burden for the family members who are not informed of how they will help or asked for their input on implementation. (Hand blocks to mother and father.)

20. Therapist: You know you should involve everyone more in Joey's programming. You'd also like to have the time to work with him every day; but you have a huge caseload and are stretched much too thin, as it is. (Hand block to therapist.)
21. Dad: The new therapy services and burdensome medical costs have forced you to purchase expensive health insurance. Other added costs include Joey's preschool tuition and transportation costs for school and appointments. It's tough making ends meet. (Hand Dad a block.)
22. Mom: You were excited about preschool, but now see that this placement may not be working very well. The teacher doesn't seem to understand Joey, and you hear nothing but negative reports from school. (Hand block to Mom.)
23. Family: It appears that some of your friends are uncomfortable with you, and you with them. Although they may want to help, to listen, to sympathize, they are often afraid of saying or doing the wrong things and hurting you, inadvertently. Little by little, they drift away. You begin to withdraw to avoid situations that are painful to others and to yourselves. Here's a block for that. (Hand a block to Mother and Father.)
24. How different life is now! It will never be quite the same again. (Have the actors stand still. Make a sweeping gesture to include the circle.) That is our extended family. They would like some help.

**DISCUSSION:**

1. After stopping the actors, ask each of them immediately what feelings and thoughts they experienced during this activity. Give each an opportunity to respond.
2. Lead a group discussion:
  - a. What did you observe happening to the characters as the role play progressed?
  - b. How did people handle the new burdens placed upon them?
  - c. Relate this to the actual situation of having a child with disabilities.