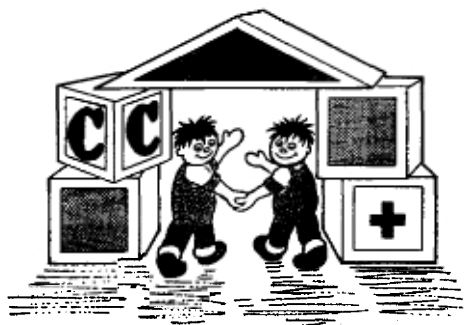


# What's Your Attitude Toward Inclusion?



Attitudes and beliefs are very personal; they form the basis for how we perceive the world. As such, they affect early childhood professionals' responses to young children and their families in real ways. Because of the impact of attitudes and beliefs, becoming aware of them is critical.

Beliefs are shaped by the past as well as by what happens today. You may be aware that an experience is shaping your attitude or it may happen without your knowing. Every new experience and bit of knowledge pass through the filter of beliefs. During the stages of your professional development, you may never have addressed your attitudes and beliefs even though they strongly affect your learning.

Most child care providers discover that they have a mix of positive and negative ideas about inclusion. These ideas are formed through a lifetime of experiences and continue to develop daily. Having a family member, neighbor, or friend with a disability often leads to positive feelings about including children with disabilities in their programs. For example, whenever you think about enrolling a child with cerebral palsy, the experiences you have had with your cousin with cerebral palsy may make it seem easier.

Many negative attitudes and beliefs are based on lack of experience. For example, if you attended a school where there were no children with disabilities enrolled, you may feel apprehensive or even fearful of inclusion because you are facing the "unknown." Having already provided care for a young child with a disability can create an attitude of acceptance. If last year you enrolled a child with Down syndrome, you may feel more confident about your ability to not only care for other young children with Down syndrome but to enroll children with other types of developmental delays.

Some attitudes and beliefs are based on the attitudes and beliefs of others. For example, a colleague may refuse to take a child who is still in diapers, and persuade you to do the same.

Becoming aware of attitudes and beliefs is as important as seeking new knowledge, reading current literature, and developing early childhood skills. You can get in touch with your own personal attitudes and beliefs about inclusion by paying attention to your emotional responses to—and reflecting on—ideas and events. Here are a few questions to help you:

- ❖ What am I feeling right now?
- ❖ Why do I feel this way?
- ❖ Why do I always avoid that situation?
- ❖ Why do I feel so excited/frustrated about this new information?
- ❖ Why do I feel comfortable (or uncomfortable) when people talk about this topic?
- ❖ Where might my response be coming from?

Beliefs and attitudes are constantly evolving and being refined. Asking these questions whenever you feel strong emotions can make attitude assessment a natural part of your learning process. While taking such a close look at yourself may not be an easy or comfortable task, your attitude is directly related to your ability to confidently care for children with disabilities.

## A Parent's Story

I did not even *want* to take Chi to preschool. I am his mother and teacher; we play and learn together every day. Since we moved to the United States, I notice the faces of people we meet at the market and at the park. Sometimes I see pity; sometimes I see them look away. Sometimes they talk to me and pretend Chi is not there. I want him to get an education. I want him to have friends his own age. I want him to belong in the community. I asked myself, *am I being too protective?*

I agreed to look at preschools to give Chi experience playing and learning with other children. I was prepared for many bad experiences. I took the list of preschools in my neighborhood. I asked each one for materials and information. I studied them one by one. I was looking for an accepting place for Chi. One of them stood out. I asked myself, could this kind of acceptance and individual concern be real?

I wanted to know more. I called the woman and made an appointment to bring Chi to meet her and look at her preschool. I wanted to see her face. When we arrived, I watched closely. I did not see pity; she did not turn away. She did not talk to me and pretend that Chi was not there. She bent down and talked to Chi. She gave him a toy she saw him looking at. She let him take it home. She said he could bring it back the next time he came to play with her.

I went with Chi when other preschoolers were there. I watched their faces. They did not look with pity; they wanted him to play. They showed him the toys. They took him to see the bunny. They asked me if he could come again. Now I take Chi to preschool every morning. He is getting better prepared to go to school. I ask myself, how are we so lucky?

## A Child Care Provider's Question

**QUESTION:** *I really believe that I would welcome any child into my program, but I am hearing alarming stories from other child care providers. Is a positive attitude really enough?*

**ANSWER:** While there is sometimes a big gap between *attitude* and *ability*, a positive attitude can have an incredible effect on your approach to the challenges that will most surely arise for you as a child care provider. A positive attitude is often described as a "can do" or a "why not" perspective. This position creates an open door for new ideas, new information, and new skills.

Attitudes serve as filters for everything that is said about a child. For instance, let's say a child comes to your program who, you are told, has been asked to leave several other early childhood settings. While this information may make you anxious, a positive attitude will make it more likely that you will look at a number of factors, explore many solutions, and use every skill at your disposal to work with the family to make your program a good placement for this child. Contrast this response with that of the individual who tells her director she is not prepared to deal with any of "those kids."

Your attitude filter impacts your choices for professional development, your ability to develop skills, and your

willingness to make changes in your program. For example, your positive attitude makes it more likely that you would be willing to learn how to perform an unfamiliar medical procedure or acquire sign language skills. Contrast this with the teacher who believes that because she has always done things a certain way, she should not have to make a change for just one child!

The simple truth is that inclusion is more likely to work when you believe it can. Attitudes affect our acquisition of knowledge as well as our ability to use that knowledge effectively. Your attitude towards problems and challenges directly affects not only your response to them, but the probability of a successful outcome for everyone involved, including you. Is a positive attitude enough, probably not, but it is *almost* enough.

