

Mainstreaming, Integration, Inclusion—Our Future

IT'S INCLUSION WHEN

- ★ everybody plays, learns, and grows—together.
- ★ each child is included in every activity, routine, and learning opportunity.
- ★ teachers and caregivers plan activities appropriate for both the developmental abilities and interest level of the children.
- ★ parents value diversity and the powerful way children learn from each other.
- ★ each child has opportunities to enjoy typical every-day-little-kid experiences.

First there was mainstreaming, then integration, and now inclusion—why the changes? At first, it may seem silly to keep revising the way we talk about services for children with disabilities. However, the words we use describe our attitude. While the words themselves may not be terribly important, our attitude about including children with disabilities in activities with their peers truly matters.

Mainstreaming means bringing a child with a disability into the mainstream of society. Introduced in the 1970's, mainstreaming was the first major push to ensure that children with disabilities have the opportunity to participate in activities and educational experiences with children who have no disabilities. Children who are mainstreamed are enrolled in existing programs and participate in activities appropriate for their developmental abilities. For example, a child might go with "his class" to music, lunch, and gym but go to another class for math, spelling, and other academic subjects. Interestingly,

all of the children seemed to benefit from these shared experiences, and we looked for more opportunities to bring children together. Mainstreaming is an important milestone because it reflected the belief that children with disabilities have the same needs as their peers.

In the 80's, the term **integration** emerged as being more descriptive of the services children with disabilities really need. Rather than a child participating only in selected activities with peers, we created a setting where every single child is an integral part of the program. This means that if the routine, environment, or activity is not working for even one child, we make modifications. Integrated child care has been a productive and exciting way for early childhood professionals to address the needs of children with disabilities the way we know best—in circle time, fingerpainting, field trips, and all the other valuable learning experiences that happen daily in our programs. All day long, we observe the every-day-little-kid needs of children with disabilities and make simple modifications so no one is left out. Once again, all the children benefitted. More importantly, teachers/caregivers demonstrated that using early childhood best practices (with modifications here and there) works for children with disabilities.

Integration does not mean creating a miniature special education class within a child care program or turning a good early childhood educator into a special educator. Doing what we know best creates an environment in which the needs of children with and without disabilities can both be satisfied. For years now, early childhood educators across the country have been practicing integration—successfully including children with disabilities in their programs.

So the term **inclusion** isn't really new after all. It's simply a more descriptive way of referring to the way we do our job. The spirit of mainstreaming and the practicality of integration have been combined. Inclusion means that we recognize that every child should be included in our early childhood program and that the needs of every child (whether he or she has a disability or not) should be considered in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of our efforts.

In the past, we might have said "we're an integrated program" or "we accept children with disabilities." Some programs were integrated, and others were not. With the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), programs cannot automatically deny access to their services because a child has a disability. It specifically includes child care programs when it says that no person with a disability can be refused services and opportunities available to those who do not have disabilities. We knew it all along.

Children—people—with disabilities benefit from and enjoy the same experiences as their peers without disabilities. Inclusion is the best way to describe the openness and the enthusiasm with which we are recognizing how important every-day-little-kid experiences are to children. If it's a fun activity or part of the routine, every child can and should be included!

Making It Work

Start With Books

A philosophy of inclusion is not only reflected in what you say and how you act but in the activities and play materials you make available to the children as well. Having children's books which naturally include children and parents with disabilities is a wonderful way to expand acceptance of diversity. Following is a sampling of children's books which do a marvelous job of supporting and strengthening a philosophy of inclusion:

Where's Chimpy? by Berniece Rabe. A little girl with Down syndrome needs her toy monkey before she goes to school. Albert Whitman & Company, 6340 Oakton Street, Morton Grove, IL 60053-2723, 1-800-255-7675. \$13.95.

A Place for Grace by Jean Davies Okimoto. Grace is a cute little dog that introduces children to "hearing dogs," the challenges of people who have hearing impairments, and American Sign Language (ASL). Redleaf Press, 450 N. Syndicate, Suite 5, St. Paul, MN 55104-4125, 1-800-423-8309. \$14.95.

My Brother, Matthew by Mary Thompson. This book centers around two young brothers, one with a disability, who share a special relationship built on love and understanding. Woodbine House, 5615 Fishers Lane, Rockville, MD 20852, 1-800-843-7323. \$14.95.

Mama Zooms by Jane Cowen-Fletcher. A young boy sits in his mother's lap and "zooms" with her into space, across the desert, and through the Wild West . . . all in her wheelchair. Scholastic Press, Inc., 2931 E. McCarty St., Jefferson City, MO, 65101, 1-800-325-6149. \$14.95.

Friends in the Park by Rochelle Bunnett. In this picture-book, a group of friends, many with disabilities, get together for a wonderful day in the park. Checkerboard Press, Inc., 30 Vesey St., New York, NY 10007. \$7.95.

A Child Care Provider's Question

QUESTION: *We are developing a new parent handbook, and we want it to reflect our philosophy of inclusion. Should we say that we are "an inclusive program" or that we "include children with disabilities"?*

ANSWER: Because you cannot actually deny services to a child just because he or she has a disability, using either one of those choices probably does not add much to your parent handbook or brochure. It would be more helpful to parents who are interested in your program if, instead, you made sure that the handbook used inclusive language throughout. A parent wants to know how you will include their child in your program, and that's what you need to describe.

They also want to know if you have any special qualities, experiences, or training that would help prepare you to meet the needs of their child. You might, for example, describe the kinds of activities the children do and explain that each of these "can be adapted to match the interest and abilities of each child." If you include a biographical sketch of you and/or other staff members, include specialized training you have received or perhaps a description that you "value incorporating cultural and developmental diversity and work hard to

make sure that every child's interests are represented in your program."

The idea is to describe, for all families, the many different ways in which you include every child in every part of your routine. There is no better way to describe inclusion! You might also be surprised to find that parents of children who do not have disabilities are just as interested in finding out that you will meet their children's individual needs. If your parent handbook uses inclusive language throughout, every family will feel that your program is a special place for their child.

