

Inclusion: What It Is and What It Isn't



It is frequently assumed that an early childhood program that practices inclusion is one that serves young children with disabilities. In fact, including children with disabilities is only a small part of being an inclusive program. In reality, an early childhood program that practices inclusion is one in which the interests, strengths, and needs of *each child*—including those with disabilities—are assessed and meaningfully addressed. Using this definition, it becomes clear that the caregiver/teacher in an inclusive program purposefully designs activities and routines that are individually suited to each child and makes adaptations as children's needs and interests develop or change.

In defining inclusion, many people want numbers or exact ratios for children with and without disabilities. Numbers, however, are not the important issue.

Inclusion is a natural component of excellence in early childhood programs whether or not a child with a disability is currently enrolled. When you individualize for each child whether or not the child has a disability or delay, you are practicing inclusion. Inclusion is characterized by 1) an open, positive attitude about the rights of all children and 2) parents being able to choose the program their child attends.

In inclusive early childhood programs, activities such as circle time, outdoor play, snack time, and learning center play are already planned so that every child in the group can participate. The daily routine does not necessarily have to change when a child with a disability enrolls, but it may need to be rearranged or modified so that the child can successfully join in. When a child has a disability, the bit of extra planning, added materials, or adjustments in the pace or schedule that may be required are seen as a natural part of the program's practice of individualizing for each child. Resources, such as the child's parent(s) and any therapists or specialists who are working with the child, are regularly consulted to help meaningfully include the child with a disability or delay. Inclusive child care does not mean turning a good child care program into a special education program; it does mean including children with and without disabilities in the regular daily activities and routines of an existing neighborhood child care or preschool program.

You may be wondering about the children with disabilities you might see in inclusive early childhood or preschool programs? The phrase "children with disabilities" does not even begin to describe the variety of strengths, needs, interests, and talents of young children with disabilities. In fact, a seemingly descriptive phrase such as "child with Down syndrome" tells you very little about the child. Two children with Down syndrome are no more alike than two children with brown hair. Looking for the individual characteristics of children helps caregivers and teachers begin to see how each child can participate in—and learn from—experiences in the early childhood setting. Children with developmental or medical disabilities as well as children with challenging behavior can be (and have been) successfully included in programs across the country—one child at a time.

As children's individual needs and strengths are matched to programs' abilities, chances for successful experiences for everyone are greatly increased. Wondrous every-day-little-kid experiences, such as finger-painting with whipped cream, climbing up the slide, eating finger Jell-O for the first time, or trying on dress-ups, are thrilling to every child. The ability to extend these experiences to young children with disabilities is one of the main reasons inclusive child care is becoming an important practice for many early childhood programs.

Try It Out

Parents who have young children with disabilities look for child care for the same reasons any parent does. However, finding child care is often more challenging. They may have additional concerns and perhaps a need for specialized care or equipment. You can help parents who have children with disabilities decide if yours is the “right” program—one that fits their needs as well as their child’s needs—by listening to the parent’s interests and concerns, describing your program accurately, and discussing together whether your program matches their expectations.

When a parent makes that first call to your program, ① **LISTEN** and learn about the child’s strengths and needs, any special concerns, and the kind of care they expect. This is your first chance to gather information about how the child could be included in your program. ② **DESCRIBE** your program, including your philosophy as well as hours and fees. Tell parents what you expect from children and families in your program and what they can expect from you. Talk openly about your experience of including children with disabilities. Let parents know what services you can offer as well as what services you are not able to provide. ③ **DISCUSS** how the parents’ needs match your program’s abilities. Talk honestly about your concerns and explain the kind of support you may need. Together identify ways to successfully include their child. Ask them for help with any special equipment or skills you will need. Use this discussion to set the stage for a future partnership based on communication and trust. If the child is enrolled, you will already have valuable information about how to include him or her, and you can look forward to the child’s participation in your program. Using this process, both of you will have begun to identify what it will take to be sure that yours continues to be the “right” program.

A Child Care Provider’s Question

QUESTION: *I am trying to do what is expected of me to include a two-year-old girl with disabilities in my program, but I feel like I’m neglecting some of my other responsibilities. I really want to make this work, but I don’t want to lose the other aspects of my program I have worked so hard to develop.*

ANSWER: Your concern is not all that uncommon. When early childhood professionals enroll a child whose needs are unfamiliar and new, they often try so hard to make it work that they forget the advantages of individualizing within the context of the wonderful early childhood experiences their program already offers.

A few years ago, another provider had this same question about including a young girl named Rachel. When the provider shared her concerns with her co-worker in the program, they had an eye-opening discussion that changed the provider’s perspective and helped her to find the balance she was looking for. The co-worker asked her, “Do you really think it’s possible to meet any child’s needs all of the time?”

Thinking of this question helped the provider keep things in perspective. She began to realize that she could not meet every child’s needs all of the time, but she could meet the needs of each child most of the time. She re-

marked, “Sometimes children have to wait their turn, and Rachel is learning to wait, too.”

Inclusion involves finding ways to include each child in typical activities and routines. Inclusion is grounded in quality early childhood practice. While occasionally it may take extra effort and even extra resources and support for a particular child, it is almost always doable within the context of typical early childhood routines and activities. When it seems like it is not, it is wise to look first at your own expectations of yourself in relationship to the child’s strengths and needs. Then, take a look at any additional resources that might be needed to ensure that the quality early childhood practices your program represents do not get lost to any of the children.

