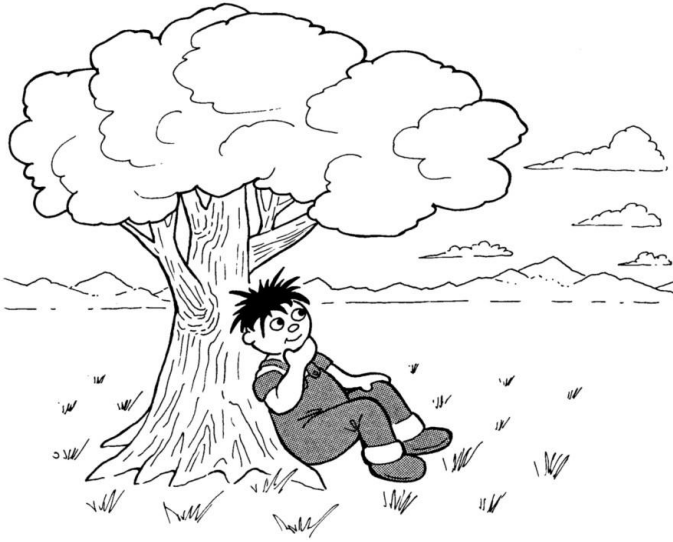


# Quality Program = Inclusive Program



When it comes to inclusion, a lot of changes have occurred in the past thirty years. It has become common knowledge that there are similarities as well as differences in how young children learn. Teachers and parents have seen the positive impact that inclusion has on very young children. They have seen what happens when parents realize that their child's developmental delays do not prevent him from having opportunities to play with other children. It has become obvious that there are reciprocal benefits when children with disabilities have regular opportunities to interact with children who do not have disabilities. This does not mean that everyone values inclusion in the same way or that inclusion is always easy. What it does mean is that people have begun to recognize the importance of inclusion and make sure their values are reflected in public policy and program practice.

Because inclusion is an ongoing process, it is not something that can be described as "finished" or "done." In fact, providers who have included children with disabilities for many years would be the first to say their experiences have taught them that there is always more to learn. Everyone's experiences are different, but the results are often quite similar. Children with disabilities are included in early childhood programs because the benefits outweigh the challenges. In a sense, inclusion is the result of a still-developing philosophy that has evolved from the earliest history with children with disabilities. It is a philosophy that continues to grow and change as knowledge, experience, and understanding of young children with disabilities and their families grow and change.

At some point in the discussion about inclusion, it becomes necessary to move away from general statements, identify what inclusion looks like in practice, and compare that picture with what happens in a typical early childhood program. In making this comparison, there are two points to remember: 1) it looks the same, and 2) it is the same.

Best practice for young children is best practice, regardless of the abilities of the children enrolled in a program. Inclusion does not change the nature of the program itself. Inclusion simply means that the providers have created a program where individual needs are met through appropriate practices and high quality care and education regardless of whether or not the children have developmental delays or a disability. Children with disabilities enjoy the routines and activities in these programs, not because routines and activities are specialized for their disability, but because they are specialized for each child.

Inclusion becomes possible when early childhood professionals are able to develop and articulate their personal beliefs and attitudes about inclusion as part of their overall philosophy of working with young children. Your philosophy about caring for children guides what you do on a daily basis. It is reflected in the kinds of toys you provide, the way you talk with and about children, how you talk with parents, the fact that you use positive behavior guidance strategies, and the kinds of activities you plan.

The field of early childhood has reached the point where it is no longer necessary to define "inclusion" or use it to describe a particular early childhood practice. The day is here when quality early childhood practice is inclusive by definition.

## Try It Out

Using children's interests to plan daily routines and activities is one effective way to individualize your program. You can discover children's interests by asking questions on your enrollment form, by conducting child observations, and during ongoing communication with parents. Interests include actions (opening and shutting or stacking), types of toys (little dolls or puzzles), experiences (listening to music or touching silky fabrics), and themes (trucks or dinosaurs).

The following steps can help you use children's interests to customize play areas and activities to enhance a child's engagement with other children and your environment.

- ✓ Identify each child's unique and individual strengths, needs, and current interests.
- ✓ Gather more information about the child's interests through observation and parent input/feedback.
- ✓ Identify resources already available in your program, from parents, and from outside sources.
- ✓ Embed toys and play materials that reflect the child's interests in existing play areas.
- ✓ Find ways to modify songs and transition activities to reflect the child's interest(s).
- ✓ Use field trips and visitors to foster learning about the child's interests for the whole group.
- ✓ Regularly check the child's progress and adapt routines and activities as interests change.

## A Child Care Provider's Question

**QUESTION:** *I work really hard to look at children individually and develop activities that meet each child's unique needs and interests. I work well with parents, and they help me succeed. I participate in planning for children with disabilities and collaborate with therapists, etc., about specific accommodations. I did some re-modeling to make it easier for a child who used a walker.*

*This has been very exciting for me and has really rounded out my ability to individualize. I've seen the benefits of having children of different abilities. However, I am getting more and more calls from parents of children with disabilities! My program isn't big enough to take them all, and even if I could, is that right? What can I do to maintain the natural early childhood environment parents are really looking for?*

**ANSWER:** You are to be applauded. Your comments indicate that your beliefs and practice reflect critical foundations for successful inclusion. The dilemma is how to meet the needs of families and at the same time maintain the type of nurturing, learning environment that allows each child to participate and develop fully.

That said, there is no simple answer to your question. Inclusion is not about numbers, it's about people. Legislation mandating inclusion does not include numbers. These laws are counting on caregivers to look thoughtfully at each child and make sound decisions based on a balance between program resources and the needs of each child and family, not on the basis of disability.

How do you find a balance? First, get a good sense of the needs of the child you are considering enrolling.

With your commitment to individualizing for each child, you probably already have a legitimate process in place—one that includes gathering information from parents and getting to know the child personally.

Second, take this information and reflect on yourself, your program, and the needs of children already enrolled. Is there a good fit between this child's needs and the time, space, and resources you have available right now? Do you have reasonable access to additional resources if necessary to accommodate this child needs? If not now, might your situation change so the child could be enrolled in the future?

It is almost certain that honest inquiry will lead to the best possible decision for everyone.

