

# CHILD CARE

plus +

SUMMER 1995

Supporting Inclusion in Early Childhood Settings

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## Weaving A Philosophy of Inclusion Into Your Program

Inclusion is not as easy as simply enrolling a child with a disability in your program, it guides every aspect of what you say and do. Even before a child is enrolled, your philosophy of inclusion is reflected by giving careful thought to what is required to fully include each child.

What is meant by "philosophy of inclusion"? It is the combination of attitudes and beliefs about young children that you convey to families, children, and colleagues. It includes the basic philosophy or framework that shapes your program: respecting diversity, implementing developmentally appropriate practices, helping children learn through play, and working in partnership with families. Your philosophy is uniquely yours, although you may share certain ideals/concepts with other professionals.

Your philosophy of inclusion may not be fully developed or written down yet, but it is there somewhere inside. The first step in articulating your philosophy is to identify your current beliefs and recognize how they drive routines and activities in your program. Think about the ideals that got you started in the field of early childhood. List five to ten statements you believe are true about young children. The next step is to review your list to see if your belief statements can be expanded to convey a philosophy of inclusion. Here are some suggestions to guide you:

### Children deserve respect for who they are.

The way you speak and write about young children conveys your philosophy. Being a kid is much more notable than having a disability. You will want to recognize individual needs and differences without minimizing typical every-day-little-kid characteristics. One way of conveying this message is by referring to the child first before any other descriptive characteristics. For example, you would say *child with a motor impairment* rather than *motor-impaired child* and *children with disabilities* instead of *disabled children*. While this may seem like a subtle

difference, it's a powerful statement of respect. As important as this message is to children, it is critical that you communicate it to parents as well. The way you refer to their child influences their perception of how you will care for their child.

### Each child should be included in activities/routines.

Your philosophy needs to be more specific than "I believe in inclusion." You need to describe your commitment to accommodate the needs of each child enrolled in your program with regard to their abilities and disabilities. The

parent of a child with a significant developmental delay, for example, should be able to look at your daily schedule and have some idea how his child will participate. Activities and routines should reflect your commitment to include each child and demonstrate flexibility in modifying routines and activities as needed.

### Children should be valued just as they are.

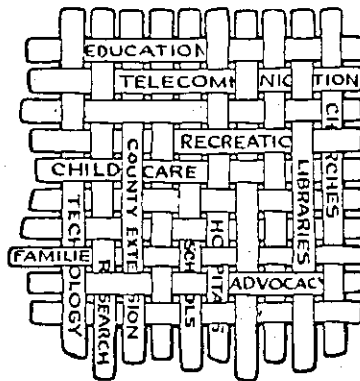
One of the benefits of inclusion is that children and adults learn to value individual differences. This exposure to similarities and differences can be used

to teach children to value diversity of all kinds. As a result, your philosophy of inclusion embraces children of different cultural and ethnic groups, gender, and religion.

### Children are part of a family.

No child comes to a child care program without a family of some kind. Sometimes the "family" is non-traditional and may include foster parents, grandparents, and other relatives. Your philosophy should recognize the important role that families play. In particular, families of children with disabilities are a resource for training, equipment, support, and guidance. The family is at the center of inclusion, and early childhood practices should reflect both a child-centered and a family-centered focus.

The next step is to weave your philosophy of inclusion into program activities, routines, and policies. You want to be sure that what you believe should happen for the young children in your care actually does happen. And, you want to be sure that your ideas about inclusion can actually be practiced every day in your program. Just like the application of inclusion, your philosophy isn't something that can be finished and put on a shelf. It keeps evolving as a representation of your beliefs and as a guide for what you do in your child care program.+ smg



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## + SPOTLIGHT: University preschool practices inclusion.

by Susan Harper-Whalen, Director

*The longer we work together with children and the more we read and observe other programs, the more questions we are left with!* Such is the dilemma of the staff at the School of Education Preschool Laboratory located on the University of Montana campus in Missoula, Montana.

Fifty years of service in the Missoula community have given the Preschool Lab program ample opportunities to reflect on shifts in the early childhood field. However, as changes in location, funding, family needs, and educational practices continue to occur, Preschool Lab staff have determined that a focus on one key practice can weather the seasons and guide the sometimes cloudy evolution of appropriate practices. That practice is to *celebrate diversity*.

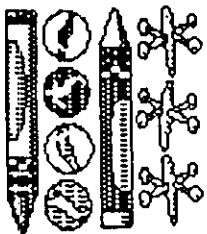
The celebration of diversity has evolved as the guiding foundation of the Preschool Lab's philosophy. The staff believe that this philosophy must be evident in all aspects of the program. Thus, enrollment targets a 3-5 age range allowing for multi-age grouping in both the morning and afternoon sessions. All children are welcome in the program with the awareness that each child brings unique strengths, interests, and opportunities for growth. As part of this commitment, an inclusion contract exists between the Preschool Lab and Missoula public schools to include children with disabilities. In addition, classroom arrangement in learning centers, flexible scheduling, project-oriented curriculum, and individual goals—set by families and teachers—for children are all viewed as a reflection of a philosophy which celebrates diversity.

University of Montana students also benefit from this celebration of individual uniqueness. Preschool Lab staff recognize that future teachers bring a variety

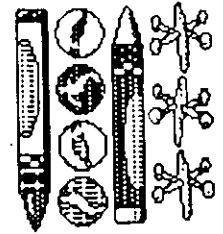
of backgrounds, goals, and needs to the classroom. Students are involved in individual goal setting, self-evaluation, and peer teaching in a safe learning environment. Rather than grading student projects, supervising teachers provide feedback, readings, and opportunities for peer- and self-evaluation. In this way, students learn to value their strengths as well as to accept and learn from weaknesses. They also enhance their own acceptance of diversity within their peer group. It is the Preschool Lab's belief that allowing university students to learn in such an environment will better enable them to respect individual needs as they move into the teaching profession.

Of course, this guiding philosophy must be a fundamental part of the Preschool Lab staff goals as well. Supervising teachers Sue Edo Gilmore and Louise Jones, administrative assistant Ella Rae Olsen, and director Susan Harper-Whalen have incorporated the celebration of diversity into staff evaluations as well as into the Preschool Lab operation as together they set goals for growth. Growth and change over time have been important to this motivated staff who believe education is always evolving and that the best teachers are also learners. However, as new preschool articles, models, and ideas flood the desks and minds of staff members, a fundamental question arises: *How can this information be used to enhance the Preschool Lab program's goal to celebrate diversity?*

Growth in the Preschool Lab's service to children, families, and university students has a unified purpose—to continue to celebrate diversity. It is this bit of focus that helps the staff keep asking (and seeking answers to) those never-ending questions in the ever-changing field of early childhood education.



# education preschool laboratory



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## + FROM THE SOURCE:

Been there; done that!

As child care providers look for information and resources to expand their ability to include children with disabilities in their programs, they may overlook an untapped but valuable—and readily available—resource. In addition to family members, therapists, and early intervention specialists, child care providers themselves have a wealth of experience and insight to offer each other about meeting young children's needs. Your colleagues in family child care, preschools, and child care centers could be sharing their knowledge and expertise with you.

Where can you find individuals who have "been there and done that"? In many communities, opportunities to meet with colleagues already exist. Local affiliate groups, child care associations, and neighborhood networks may already be organized and meeting regularly. If so, attend these groups and encourage members to build their evening get-togethers and skill-building workshops around the principles of inclusion. Invite providers who are developing or have developed specialized skills to discuss their progress and practical application to children in their programs. Identify individual providers who can serve as mentors for you as you meet the needs of specific children in your program.

If there is no local organization where you can meet regularly with other providers, you may have to create your own group or form your own network of mentoring relationships. The return will be well worth your effort. No one knows better the territory than one who has been there (and done that). If child care providers would persistently form supportive connections with one another, the isolation that often characterizes early childhood programs in both rural and urban neighborhoods could become a thing of the past, and children with unique needs and interests would be better served.+

## + MAKING IT WORK:

Inclusion is for kids, too!

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.+

## + NOTES FROM HOME:

Inclusion Means Us, Too!

My wife and I are from New Delhi, India. When our son, Rostan, turned three, we decided it was time for him to have regular experiences with other children. Ros is a very active boy and loves to play with other children. We searched and searched for just the "right" place for our child, and finally found Great Expectations Child Care.

I will admit to being very surprised when we visited the program and saw a number of children with disabilities actively involved in the activities and games. We didn't even realize that children with disabilities could be in an every day child care program. We were even more surprised when we read the program's enrollment materials. They constantly mentioned focusing on the children's individual needs, modifying the routines and activities to match the children's abilities and interests, and valuing the differences and unique qualities of all of the children in the program.

It was then that we realized that even though Ros doesn't have any kind of disability, he is from a different culture, a different race, and a different religion than most of the children in the program. We were thrilled to know that the staff of this child care program would work as hard to include Ros as they might to include a child in a wheelchair. It was the first time that I realized that "inclusion" truly means everyone!.+

## + WHAT DO I DO WHEN

**QUESTION:** *I don't really have a parent handbook or any "program materials." Are there other ways that I can let parents know and help them understand how committed I am to inclusion?*

**ANSWER:** Every interaction, phone call, announcement on the bulletin board, and note sent home provides an opportunity to relate your philosophy of inclusion to families. All of your actions—from how you greet families in the morning to how you help the children settle down at nap time—should reflect your convictions. When you talk to families about their child's day, use the ideas you have worked into your philosophy to help you. Let your philosophy truly guide what you do.

In one child care center where staff had really worked hard to develop a program philosophy, they were dismayed when the program received negative feedback surrounding the issue of inclusion. Families responded on their program satisfaction survey that they had observed that certain children had been left out of activities. Apparently, parents had carefully looked at children's artwork which was regularly displayed around the center and had not seen these children's work represented. In this case, the philosophy was not supported by action so no one was really sure what the program intended.

The best way to let parents know you are committed to inclusion is to let your entire program reflect your philosophy. Regardless of what is written in program materials, make sure that each and every action reflects the concepts that are important to you. In fact, if your

philosophy is not evident in your routines and activities, it is worthless to have it in writing!+

*(If you have a question about children with disabilities in child care settings, please send your question to CHILD CARE plus+.)*

## + RESOURCE REVIEW

**All Kids Count** by L. Doggett and J. George (1993) characterizes the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as an instrument to open new doors of opportunity for promoting inclusion. Identifies steps to take to make early childhood policies and procedures as well as settings reflect inclusion and comply with the ADA. Describes the steps to successful inclusion of young children and provides an extensive list of resources for child care providers. To order, send \$12.50 to Publications, The Arc of the US, P.O. Box 1047, Arlington, TX 76004.+

*CHILD CARE plus+* is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators.

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