

CHILD CARE

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Supporting Inclusion in Early Childhood Settings

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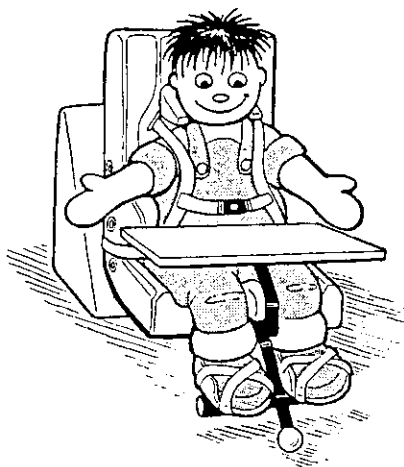
+ Helping Young Children Learn About Differences

One of the most wonderful things about young children is their abundant curiosity; it only makes sense that children would be curious about each other as well. In most early childhood settings, children have many opportunities to explore both similarities and differences with other children of varied abilities. Let's look at a few ideas that you can use to help children learn to understand and celebrate differences as well as similarities in the people around them.

It is important to realize that children look to you as a model for how to act in unfamiliar situations. They will mirror your attitudes toward other children whether you reflect acceptance or discomfort. It is vital, then, that you assess your own feelings about a child's inclusion, learn to overcome any fears or concerns, and get any training you may need. If you are apprehensive or resistant about including a child in a wheelchair, it is likely that the children will also be uncomfortable and possibly even

resent or dislike the child. On the other hand, if **you** are comfortable and matter-of-fact about including a child who uses a wheelchair, the children learn that a wheelchair is not a barrier to participation, and the child in the wheelchair can relax, be himself, and participate.

You may hope that labeling children to explain a disability will help them understand why a particular child looks or acts differently. In reality, labels explain very little to young children (or anyone else, for that matter). Being told that a child has Down syndrome, for example, does not provide any information about why the child moves or talks the way she does. Children are more interested in what the child **can** do and in how the child can interact with them.



Some providers try to anticipate children's need to know by preparing them ahead of time. In fact, it is much better to give children the information they need *when they need it*, and children's comments or questions clearly tell you what information they need. When a topic comes up, it is best to respond briefly, with an answer that matches the simplicity of the question. If a child asks, "Why doesn't Jamie walk?",

you might say, *His muscles are not as strong as yours or His body works differently so he gets around in his wheelchair.* It is unnecessary to give more information than children ask for; instead, wait for more questions. Sometimes, you might even be able to encourage children to ask the child with the disability their question. You could say, *Maybe Jamie would like to tell you himself why he doesn't walk.*

It may be difficult for children to verbalize the complexity of their feelings about people with disabilities. Very young children often do not appear to notice differences, while older children tend to freely express their curiosity or discomfort with another child's appearance or behavior.

Depending on the situation and the child, preschool children may verbalize what they are thinking or feeling; other times, their actions show they are curious or anxious.

Young children may express their thoughts in cautious reactions (avoiding a child who drools), by imitating another child's behavior (pretending to have seizure), or by incorporating their concerns into play (having a doll who cannot talk). Although it can be unnerving to see a child's curiosity or discomfort played out so vividly, it provides a wonderful opportunity for you to talk about children's feelings and offer simple explanations. By listening and watching closely, you can observe what information children may need in order to understand and be comfortable with any child.

One of your roles in supporting inclusion is to create an environment that is safe for questions and comments from the children while at the same time looking for ways to directly teach sensitivity and respect for individual differences. As young children learn about differences and similarities, they build friendships with each other which, in turn, help to create a larger community of respect. + SMG

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+ NOTES FROM HOME

The Mac Book

(Excerpted with permission from *Disability Solutions*
September/October 1996.)

Accepting our son, Mac, as an individual has been a priority for our family since he was born. We have tried to be sure that Mac was accepted on his own merit, rather than by the label, "Down syndrome." We have also worked hard at helping Mac to be accepted in our community and at school. His educational experiences started in an inclusive preschool, but as public school approached, we worried about the decisions people might be making before they knew him well. We did the usual things to introduce Mac to his teachers each year, but felt the process could be improved.

We learned of a tool that could really help this process. Members of our son's Early Childhood Team went to a conference on inclusion in our school district. The speech therapist who worked with Mac came away excited about a concept presented at the workshops by Terri Vandercook and Laura Medwetz called "A Kid Portfolio." A Kid Portfolio is a collection of pictures, writings, and work samples that create a new view of all aspects of the child's life: family, school, religious, community, and friends. The portfolio can be used to provide the "present level of performance" descriptions expected in the IEP, but it also provides much more. Detailed stories, pictures, history, and suggestions are included that are not usually found in an IEP. What actually goes into a "Kid Portfolio" depends on the family and the student. The goal is to provide an image that highlights the human side of the student for the staff.

We had already created a photo album about our family that we shared at times with new parents of children with Down syndrome. We simply combined what we already had with the idea of the portfolio to create *The Mac Book*. It has proven to be worth the time devoted to its creation.

We first used *The Mac Book* during the transition meeting from the Early Childhood Program to Kindergarten. I was immediately impressed by reactions from the professionals. Most of the team members at that meeting had already met Mac because of his involvement at his sisters' school events. There was one person who did not know Mac. She seemed to be more distant and aloof at the beginning of the meeting. However, as she began looking at *The Mac Book*, her demeanor changed. She was interested in more than the process. She was interested in Mac. What better way for professionals to learn about our son than through our eyes. The principal felt every child in her school should have a book like *The Mac Book*.

The more people learn about Mac as we know him, the

easier it becomes for all involved. People are not as afraid of the label. "Down syndrome" is only a piece of who our son is. The only label he should have to wear is his name: Mac. He wears it with pride. + Molly Grogan Mattheis

Molly Grogan Mattheis is a Family Coordinator at the University of Montana Rural Institute on Disabilities. She lives with her husband Phil and their three children in Florence, MT. For information about *The Mac Book*, write to Molly at the Rural Institute on Disabilities, Corbin Hall, University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812, or call (407) 243-2892.

+ MAKING IT WORK

Differences and Environment

Did you know that the early childhood environment—play materials, schedules, room arrangement, routines—can communicate respect for individual differences? The following narrative describing the arrangement of an early childhood program's housekeeping area may help you visualize how that type of environment might look.

The housekeeping area is arranged so the entry way, path, and play space allow each child opportunities to become actively involved in play. Dishes, dolls, and dress-up clothes are placed on shelving that each child can see and reach—the ideal height changes according to children's needs. And, when this group includes a child using a wheelchair, a higher child-sized table and chairs are used so everyone can fit comfortably up to the table when "dinner is served."



The "house" is stocked with typical supplies like dishes, pots, pans, and baby dolls which address a range of abilities. The tiny set of play silverware includes large, easy to grasp pieces. One large doll has an easy to manipulate "Velcro" wardrobe. Another baby doll is made of soft, washable rubber scented with vanilla to offer a multi-sensory experience for children, especially the child with limited vision. Items like adaptive eating utensils, bolsters, and adapted chairs are often seen in the area to allow children to become familiar with items they may have a bit of apprehension or curiosity about.

Children have a choice about whether or not they play in any given area, and a range of activities—from blocks and art to books and music tapes—is always available. They readily learn to accept that one child uses a special seat to sit at circle time, another child seldom chooses to play in the house, and a third child uses sign language to communicate wherever she plays. The environment helps children feel comfortable about different kids, doing different things, in different ways, at different times. + SHW

+ SPOTLIGHT: Dependent Care Management Group

Amidst the ruins of the Alamo, the lazy meandering of the Rio Grande River, and the sagebrush plains around San Antonio, Texas, exists the Dependent Care Management Group (DCMG). This organization daily wears five different (ten gallon) hats: 1)

Connections - Child and Elder Care Resource & Referral Services, 2) the Inclusive Child Care Project of Texas, 3) Program & Career Development, 4) Work & Family Program Consultation, and 5) Inclusion Consultation.

It is the Inclusive Child Care Project of Texas that has particularly captured the hearts and attention of early childhood professionals and parents of young children who have disabilities. This five-year project was funded by the Texas Planning Council for Developmental Disabilities. The primary goal of the project was to increase the availability of child care for children with disabilities throughout Texas by providing training, technical assistance, and service coordination to child care providers.

During the five years of the project, services were provided to more than 2000 child care providers, families of children with disabilities, and professionals and organizations serving or advocating for children with disabilities. Four project activities deserve special mention: 1) the implementation of a "Peer Coaching System," which entailed hands-on director-to-director coaching for the inclusion of children with disabilities; 2) the organization of statewide summits in six regions of Texas to address needs of children with disabilities, reaching over 600 child care teachers, parents, and programs as well as 200 interdisciplinary professionals; 3) consultation at the state level with early childhood intervention, Head Start, public education, and child care staff concerning development of collaborative inclusion policies;

and 4) the preparation of a manual and training materials for successfully implementing inclusive programs.

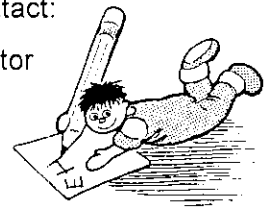
Not wanting to stop at mere statewide collaboration and planning, DCMG went on to develop *FYI Brochures* for parents in Texas which gave a listing of central contact numbers to local and regional programs serving children and families, the videotape *ABC's of Inclusive Child Care* which was awarded the *Barbara Jordan Medallion*, and the manual for child care resource and referral counselors called *Child Care For All Children: A Referral Counselor's Guide to Inclusive Care* in addition to the guide commissioned by the Texas Workforce Commission *Everyone's Welcome - First Steps to Inclusion*.

Unfortunately, the five years of funding for the Inclusive Child Care Project of Texas from the Texas Planning Council for Developmental Disabilities ended in August of 1996. Since that time, DCMG has continued to offer many of the same services under their Child Care Resource and Referral Program. Services which continue include: consultation and referral for parents seeking child care and other services for children with disabilities; training for child care providers, families of children with disabilities, and professionals; and consultation on issues related to child care and inclusion for individu-

als, agencies, and/or state systems. + KMG

For more information, please contact:

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+ WHAT DO I DO WHEN

QUESTION: *We have just enrolled a child with cerebral palsy. The child is severely delayed and has very limited motor skills. He also has seizures and we are concerned about how to prepare the other children so that they aren't frightened by his behavior.*

ANSWER: First, you do not need to prepare the children for the enrollment of a child with a disability by doing any more than you would for any other child who was entering your program. Young children will not understand what cerebral palsy is, and if you try to describe seizures, delayed motor skills, or different-sounding speech, you may set up a situation where the children expect to see this child as different or unusual. What you can do is prepare by learning as much as possible about the child's abilities and disabilities. For example, find out as much as you can about the seizures so that you know how often they occur, what they look like, and what you need to do when one occurs. Discuss with coworkers what will happen if the child has a seizure during each part of your routine. If you are prepared and relaxed, the children are not likely to be afraid. They probably will, however, want to talk about it afterward, particularly if they have never seen a seizure before.

Be prepared for questions and do not be concerned if children experiment with different-sounding speech patterns, pretend that they cannot walk, or begin to role play or pretend that a favorite doll is having a seizure. These behaviors are perfectly common ways for children to learn about disabilities, and if not discouraged, they will not last long.

The key to helping young children understand each other is to talk about differences associated with a child's disabilities only when children are ready to talk—when they ask ques-

Child Care plus+ staff are available to answer questions, brainstorm, problem-solve, and provide resources and training regarding young children and inclusion.

Call 1-800-235-4122

tions or express their curiosity. Typically, children will ask an initial question that is relatively simple and easy to answer. Often this is done partly to test your reaction and gauge your response. If children see that you are willing to talk about these issues, they will generally come back to you whenever they need more information. Your job is to give children the information they need—when they need it—in a way that is calm, honest, and straightforward. + SMG

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

After a decade of lively discussion, new research, and a broader base of experience, the revised edition of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs* (NAEYC, 1997) has been published. This volume spells out more fully the principles undergirding developmentally appropriate practice with consideration for children's individual needs and families' concerns, and describes guidelines for making decisions in early childhood settings for young children. To obtain your own copy, send \$8 to NAEYC, 1509 16th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-1426. +

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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