



# STRATEGIES TO FACILITATE AND SUSTAIN THE INCLUSION OF YOUNG CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

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The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA)<sup>1</sup> supports the full participation, or *inclusion*, of young children with disabilities with their typically developing peers. However, data indicate that many young children with disabilities are not being included with their peers. This policy brief was developed to provide preschool administrators with an overview of inclusion in early childhood and strategies to facilitate the inclusion of young children with disabilities in their programs.

## WHAT IS INCLUSION AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

*Early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society. The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential. The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and supports<sup>2</sup> (p.2).*

This definition of inclusion set forth jointly by the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) reflects the preferred practice of educating young children with disabilities with their typically developing peers in settings they would normally attend.

Research in early childhood suggests inclusion is beneficial for all young children:

- Children without disabilities in inclusive settings have shown only positive outcomes<sup>3,4</sup>.
- Inclusive settings provide all children with disabilities opportunities to improve the common family-preferred developmental outcome: social skills<sup>3,4</sup>.

To date, there is no evidence to indicate specialized classrooms and settings for young children with disabilities are superior to inclusive settings<sup>4</sup>, meaning specialized classrooms not do provide more developmental benefits when compared with high-quality, inclusive classrooms<sup>3</sup>. Further, there is no evidence to suggest that children with specific types of disabilities are better candidates for inclusive environments<sup>3,4</sup>.

The evidence does suggest that inclusion “produces the desired outcomes only when young children with disabilities are [included] at least several days per week into the social and instructional environment with typically developing peers (p. 2)<sup>4</sup>.

## WHAT ARE THE IDEA PROVISIONS THAT SUPPORT THE INCLUSION OF YOUNG CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES?

IDEA supports the inclusion of young children with disabilities through two provisions:

- the **least restrictive environment**<sup>5</sup> (LRE) for preschoolers with disabilities, meaning those children ages 3 through 5(612(a)(5)(A)), and
- the **natural environment**<sup>5</sup> for infants and toddlers with disabilities, or children birth through 2 (632 (4)(G)).

Regulations governing the LRE provision in IDEA require each public agency ensure

- to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled<sup>5</sup> (34 CFR § 300.114(a)(2)(i); and*
- Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily<sup>5</sup> (34 CFR § 300.114(a)(2)(ii)).*

In determining the LRE, the regulations state:

*the educational placement of a child with a disability, including a preschool child with a disability, each public agency must ensure that—*

*(c) Unless the IEP of a child with a disability requires some other arrangement, the child is educated in the school that he or she would attend if nondisabled<sup>5</sup> (34 CFR § 300.116(c));*

IDEA LRE provisions encourage the placement of children with their same-age, non-disabled peers, unless the needs of the child cannot be met with the use of supports in these settings.

### **HOW MANY YOUNG CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES ARE BEING INCLUDED?**

The LRE provisions in IDEA should ensure young children with disabilities access to preschool programs. However, a moderate percentage of preschoolers with disabilities are served in these settings<sup>6</sup>.

For preschoolers with disabilities, states report that 48% of these children spend 80% or more of their time in inclusive settings<sup>6</sup>.

One impediment to public school administrators placing preschoolers with disabilities in inclusive settings may be the lack of high quality, general early childhood programs for young children. Despite such constraints, IDEA states that:

*Almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by ...*

*(C) coordinating this title with other local, educational service agency, State, and Federal school improvement efforts, including improvement efforts under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, in order to ensure that such children can benefit from such efforts and that special education can become a service for such children rather than a place where such children are sent<sup>1</sup>;*

*(D) providing appropriate special education and related services, and aids and supports in the regular classroom, to such children, whenever appropriate (601(c)(5)(D))<sup>1</sup>.*

Strategies to coordinate LRE provisions with other improvement efforts and strategies to provide special education and related services in non-public school

settings require preschool administrators to consider several components.

### **STEPS TO FACILITATE AND SUSTAIN INCLUSION IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD COMMUNITY**

Research from the field suggests that the successful inclusion of young children with disabilities depends on several factors, including specialized knowledge, positive attitudes and resources, and effective cross-sector collaboration<sup>7</sup>.

#### ***Successful inclusion requires specialized knowledge of evidence-based practices.***

Years of research suggest that “positive, sustained social outcomes found in [inclusive] settings have been seen *only* when interaction is frequent, planned, and carefully orchestrated by [practitioners]”<sup>4</sup> (p. 293). To provide children with high quality experiences that promote these desired outcomes, practitioners must be familiar with evidence-based practices that facilitate social interaction and know how to implement them with fidelity.

Training and technical assistance (T&TA) support is the main avenue to improve the quality of personnel and programs<sup>8</sup>. Through T&TA, early childhood practitioners can learn strategies to meet the needs of children with disabilities in general early childhood environments, early childhood special educators can support their early childhood colleagues and offer their expertise, and all practitioners can learn to coordinate and combine efforts to provide high quality supports in existing early childhood programs that meet the needs of all young children.

Inclusion may necessitate major change within the early childhood community. Preschool administrators can guide the development and implementation of policies, practices, and partnerships needed to successfully and meaningfully include young children with disabilities. Public schools can work with community programs to help build their expertise as well as provide itinerant specialists.

***“Successful inclusion requires attention to far more than placement; it must also address attitudes, resources, and curricula”<sup>9</sup> (p. 186).***

**Attitudes** toward inclusion constitute a major barrier in the inclusion of young children with disabilities<sup>8,9</sup>. However, leadership philosophy, beliefs, and behavior can shape and drive successful inclusion policy, practice, and systems change efforts<sup>10</sup>.

The availability of **resources** that communicate the purpose and benefits of inclusion to administrators, practitioners, and families also influence the acceptance and implementation of inclusion<sup>11</sup>.

Resources that promote the practice of inclusion are often based on curricula. The term **curricula** refers broadly to **evidence-based, recommended practices** in the field. Given the importance of specialized instruction to improve child outcomes<sup>11</sup>, training resources may include videos of teachers using evidence-based strategies to effectively facilitate meaningful interaction between children with disabilities and their peers<sup>12</sup>.

### ***Inclusion depends on cross-sector collaboration and partnership***<sup>9</sup>

Children with disabilities may receive services in a number of early childhood programs (*e.g.*, Head Start, child care, private programs, community and state-funded prekindergarten). Collaboration across this expansive network of programs “can result in better understanding of the various programs, of the needs of families of young children, and of how to meet the diverse needs of all children in the community”<sup>8</sup> (p. 67). Such efforts promote respect and communication across programs and between programs and families and lay a foundation for partnerships useful in addressing challenges, sharing resources, and providing support<sup>13</sup>.

### ***Address Attitudes and Beliefs***

Through an annual state or local *Inclusion Summit*, preschool administrators can set a priority for high quality inclusion, provide a forum for administrators, assess statewide inclusion practices, and identify and develop a plan to support and sustain high quality inclusion. Summit activities may include:

- Requiring the attendance of administrators from state and local programs serving young children
- Reviewing the purpose and importance of inclusion
- Asking administrators to self-assess programs using the DEC Recommended Practices Workbook's<sup>14</sup> inclusion items
- Inviting attendees to share self-assessments
- Encouraging attendees to share challenges and resources related to successful inclusion in small groups
- Inviting administrators to share inclusion success stories

- Identifying and summarizing community needs related to inclusion and translating them into focus areas for improvement
- Using focus areas to
  - Develop/update a shared vision
  - Craft an action plan
  - Identify resources
  - Designate a state- or local-level T&TA Inclusion Work Group to carry out the action plan

### ***Provide Resources and Evidence-Based Practices via a T&TA Inclusion Work Group***

The knowledge of research and/or practice alone is not enough. Knowledge related to effective, appropriate, and recommended practices (*i.e.*, evidence-based practices) associated with successful inclusion is needed to promote and sustain improved outcomes for all young children.

Preschool administrators, in partnership with state and school district leaders, can appoint a T&TA Inclusion Work Group that is charged with carrying out the action plan described above; providing targeted T&TA, consultation, and training to improve the quality of programs and personnel; and creating a structure for continuous monitoring<sup>11</sup>. Major Work Group responsibilities will likely include:

- Identifying programs and personnel needing T&TA
- Providing resources
- Conducting trainings around evidence-based practices
- Conducting trainings around progress monitoring and data collection
- Guidance around collaborative work
- Coaching teachers' use of evidence-based strategies related to inclusion
- Regular communication with state and school district leaders on T&TA Work Group efforts
- Developing strategies for programs to self-assess inclusion-specific practices
- Follow-up with identified issues and struggling programs

The role and functions of the Work Group may be evaluated and revised at the annual Inclusion Summit to better meet community needs around inclusion.

### ***Promote Cross-Sector Collaboration***

Preschool administrators may enlist the assistance of the Work Group to coordinate communication across and beyond early childhood programs.

Within the early childhood community, the Work Group can identify successful inclusion sites and encourage program directors and state leaders to visit these sites. The Work Group can also connect neighboring directors with one another, encourage them to self-assess their programs using the DEC Recommended Practices Workbook<sup>14</sup>, then meet to discuss challenges and share resources.

Beyond the community, the T&TA Inclusion Work Group may function as an Advisory Group, notifying state and local leaders about program needs, such as additional planning time, resources, or funding and soliciting resources from the larger community.

The Work Group should also communicate the importance of high quality inclusion using anecdotes from local programs and the impact of the Work Group's T&TA on program and personnel quality and child outcomes. The Work Group can invite state and local policymakers to see the value of high quality inclusion sites. Similarly, the Work Group can develop recommendations for the use of limited state and local early childhood resources<sup>8</sup>.

## SUMMARY

Federal policies alone do not ensure the inclusion of young children with disabilities. The priority for high quality inclusion, communicated through state and local program leadership, can influence community acceptance of inclusion, drive the use of evidence-based practices, and produce high quality, inclusive programs. State and local leadership is needed to support the personnel that provide young children with disabilities access to, participation in, and appropriate supports needed to participate fully with their typically developing peers.

## RESOURCES

- *SpecialQuest*  
[http://www.specialquest.org/sqtm/approach\\_full.pdf](http://www.specialquest.org/sqtm/approach_full.pdf)
- *CONNECT: The Center to Mobilize Early Childhood Knowledge's* Foundation of Inclusion Birth to Five Modules - <http://community.fpg.unc.edu/connect-modules/resources/videos/foundations-of-inclusion-birth-to-five>
- *Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)* - <http://www.dec-sped.org>
- *Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion (ECRII)* - <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ECRII/index.html>
- *Head Start Center for Inclusion* - <http://depts.washington.edu/hcenter/>
- *National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (NECTAC) – Inclusion in LRE* - <http://www.nectac.org/topics/inclusion/default.asp>
- *National Professional Development Center on Inclusion (NCPDI)* - <http://community.fpg.unc.edu/npdci>
- *The Colorado Center for Social Emotional Competence and Inclusion* - <http://www.pyramidplus.org>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq*

<sup>2</sup> DEC/NAEYC. (2009). *Early childhood inclusion: A joint position statement of the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)*. Available from [http://www.dec-sped.org/uploads/docs/about\\_dec/position\\_concept\\_papers/PositionStatement\\_Inclusion\\_Joint\\_updated\\_May2009.pdf](http://www.dec-sped.org/uploads/docs/about_dec/position_concept_papers/PositionStatement_Inclusion_Joint_updated_May2009.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Guralnick, M. J. (2001). A framework for change in early childhood inclusion. In M. J. Guralnick (Ed.), *Early childhood inclusion: Focus on change* (pp. 3-38). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

<sup>4</sup> Strain, P. (1990). LRE for preschool children with handicaps: What we know, what we should be doing. *Journal of Early Intervention, 14*(4), 291-296.

<sup>5</sup> Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Regulations, 34 C.F.R § 300 *et. seq*

<sup>6</sup> Lazara, A., Danaher, J., Kraus, R., Goode, S., Hipps, C. & Festa, C. (Eds.). (2010). *Section 619 Profile* (17<sup>th</sup> ed.). Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute, National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, B. J. & Rose, D. F. (1993). *Administrator's policy handbook for preschool mainstreaming*. Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.

<sup>8</sup> Smith B. J. & Rapport, M. J. K. (2001). Public policy in early childhood inclusion. In M. J. Guralnick (Ed.), *Early childhood inclusion: Focus on change* (pp. 49-68). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

<sup>9</sup> Bricker, D. (1995). The challenge of inclusion. *Journal of Early Intervention, 19*(3), 179-194.

<sup>10</sup> Rose, D. F., & Smith, B. J., (1993). Public policy report: Preschool mainstreaming: Attitude barriers and strategies for addressing them. *Young Children, 48*(4), 59-62.

<sup>11</sup> National Professional Development Center on Inclusion. (2009). *Research synthesis points on early childhood inclusion*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute, Author. Available from <http://community.fpg.unc.edu/npdci>

<sup>12</sup> CONNECT: *The Center to Mobilize Early Childhood Knowledge's* Foundation of Inclusion Birth to Five Modules. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute. Available from <http://community.fpg.unc.edu/connect-modules/learners>

<sup>13</sup> Hayden, P., Frederick, L., Smith, B. J., (2003). *A road map for facilitating collaborative teams*. Longmont, CA: Sopris West.

<sup>14</sup> Sandall, S., Hemmeter, M. L., Smith, B., & McLean, M. (Eds.). (2005). *DEC recommended practices: A comprehensive guide for practical application in early intervention/early childhood special education*. Missoula, MT: Division for Early Childhood.

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