

Parent Aware Tip Sheets

Accessible Programs and Inclusive Practices

During their early years children develop skills they will use throughout their lives. For the most part, caregivers can anticipate what children of differing ages are able to do and what skills they will master next. Sometimes development does not occur as expected. Children may not develop at a typical rate or they may have special needs related to medical conditions or disabilities.

What are the advantages to welcoming all children?

Children with special needs have not always been cared for alongside typically developing children. However, in recent years early childhood experts have determined that including children with special needs in the same programs with typically developing children has a wide range of advantages.

Who Benefits	How They Benefit
Children with special needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are spared the effects of separate, segregated education – including the negative effects of labeling and the negative attitudes fostered by lack of contact. • They are provided with typically developing peer models that allow them to learn new adaptive skills and/or learn how to use their existing skills through imitation. • They are provided with typically developing peers with whom to interact and learn social and/or communication skills. • They are provided with realistic life experiences that prepare them to live in the community. • They are provided with opportunities to develop friendships with typically developing peers.
Children who are typically developing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are provided with opportunities to form realistic and accurate views about individuals with special needs. • They are provided with opportunities to develop positive attitudes toward others who are different from themselves. • They are provided with opportunities to learn altruistic behaviors and when and how to use such behaviors. • They meet individuals who successfully achieve despite challenges.
Families of children with special needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are able to learn about typical development. • They may feel less isolated from their community. • They may develop relationships with families of typically developing children who can provide them with meaningful support.
Families of children who are typically developing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They may develop relationships with families of children with special needs and thereby make a contribution to them and the community. • They will have opportunities to teach their children about individual differences and about accepting individuals who are different.
Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They can conserve early childhood resources by limiting the need for segregated specialized programs. • They can conserve educational resources if children with special needs are included at the preschool level and continue in regular, as compared to special education, placements during elementary school.

What are the key components to running an inclusive program?

Early childhood inclusion features three key components:

- Access
- Participation
- Supports

Providing these three components determines to a great extent whether or not an environment is inclusive.

- **Access.** Access means children's ability to be part of the program. To determine if the program is inclusive ask, do children with special needs have access to this program? Can they enroll? Are they welcomed? Programs that have not made even simple modifications to their physical environment may be signaling that children with special needs aren't welcome. To be inclusive programs and providers must provide access to the program.
- **Participation.** Once children with special needs have access to a program they must also be able to participate in the activities. To gauge whether or not a child can participate in the program ask, can the child with special needs, for the most part, do the same things the other children in the program are doing? Can the child participate as an equal in the group?
It is certainly true that providers may need to make some modifications to serve a child with special needs; but modifications shouldn't mean a separate program in the same space. The children shouldn't be on parallel tracks. They should be involved in activities as peers within the same group.
- **Supports.** Children with special needs will require some modifications of the program. Like all children they will require caregivers to attend to their individual needs. They may need support from outside services – like speech therapy or other specialists. Or they may simply need caregivers to support them in modifying activities to allow them access and participation. For example, a child with a hearing loss may require caregiver support in using amplification equipment while in the program. Caregivers might further support this child by learning some basic sign language or carefully planning to be sure the child can see the provider during group time for lip reading.

What should you do when planning an inclusive program?

When planning and implementing an inclusive program, caregivers should:

- Discuss with family members the child's special needs. It is critical that caregivers fully understand the child's needs and the responsibilities the caregiver will have in providing care.
- Meet specialists who will provide any additional services. Caregivers may need to work closely with speech therapists, physical therapists or other professionals.
- Plan and implement observation and assessment as for typically developing children. Caregivers plan activities to meet children's needs based on observations of their development. Although the child with special needs may require modified activities, the process of observing and planning is the same.
- Be aware of community resources to meet children's needs. Parents consider caregivers experts in child development. They count on caregivers to point them toward resources they may need to identify a child's potential special needs and to receive services necessary to address those needs.
- Plan and implement regular communication with families. Regardless of the rate at which children develop or the skills that they may be struggling to develop, success depends on parents and caregivers working together.
- Ask questions and seek support. Caregivers cannot be expected to be experts on every condition that might impact children's development. Take advantage of specialists who provide services or the program's child care health consultant to learn more about the varying needs of children and the ways in which development can be supported.