
~ TRAINING SOLUTIONS ~

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MONTANA EARLY CHILDHOOD PROJECT

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Embedding Inclusion in Existing Professional Development

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Shared assumptions about the meaning of inclusion are critical for determining a) who would benefit from professional development, b) what practitioners need to know and be able to do, and c) how learning opportunities are organized and facilitated as part of an integrated professional development system. ~ DEC/NAEYC

INTRODUCTION

The fifth principle of *Montana's Training Approval System Guiding Principles* states: "Training must maintain a strong commitment to recognize diversity among trainers, practitioners, children, families, and settings . . ." The key points of this principle are:

- A. Training is conducted in accessible locations and participants are asked whether they may need any accommodations to participate.
- B. Training provides opportunities for participants to view knowledge and implementing skills from a variety of cultural perspectives, family configurations, and parenting styles.
- C. Training acknowledges that children have varying abilities and provides information for individualizing, making accommodations, and accessing resources.
- D. Training does not perpetuate prejudice or stereotypes.

Have you ever wondered whether your training meets these criteria? Perhaps you have even wondered what this fifth principle really means or what it would look like in practice. While there are many aspects of diversity that could be explored, let's focus on just one—what it takes to provide professional development that supports inclusion of young children with disabilities or delays in early childhood settings.

In a June 2000 joint position statement of the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC),

inclusion was identified as the preferred service delivery option for young children with disabilities and/or developmental delays. It acknowledged that early childhood professionals need to be sufficiently knowledgeable about the needs of young children with disabilities—and about interventions—in order to provide age-appropriate and individually appropriate care and education for each child with whom they work.

In April 2009, DEC and NAEYC collaborated again to develop an updated and more comprehensive position statement on early childhood inclusion that includes:

- A definition of inclusion
- The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high quality early childhood programs and services
- Recommendations for how the position statement should be used

A brief examination of the most recent position statement can help you recognize the underpinnings of inclusion and how you might incorporate them into training events. Let's also explore further the application in training and provide a pathway for any trainer who seeks to be responsive to the growing need of early childhood professionals to be prepared to enroll each and every child.

DEFINITION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD INCLUSION

DEC and NAEYC felt that "the lack of a shared national definition of inclusion has contributed to mis-

understandings about inclusion." The definition they ultimately created in April 2009 states:

"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."

DEFINING FEATURES

The DEC/NAEYC position paper defines the key features of inclusion as access, participation, and supports. These features apply to both early childhood programs and services. What is meant by access, participation, and supports is briefly described in *Early Childhood Inclusion: A Summary*. As you read the descriptions, think about how they correlate with the developmentally appropriate practices you are already teaching. Ask yourself what you might do to enhance your training to include the broader implications described.

Access - "means providing a wide range of activities and environments for every child by removing physical barriers and offering multiple ways to promote learning and development."

Participation - "means using a range of instructional approaches to promote engagement in play and learning activities, and a sense of belonging for every child."

Supports - "refer to broader aspects of the system such as professional development, incentives for inclusion and opportunities for communication and collaboration among families and professionals to assure high quality inclusion."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for how families and professionals can use the position statement to improve early childhood practices and policies are also listed in *Ear-*

ly Childhood Inclusion: A Summary. As you read the recommendations, consider how each one might be applied to the professional development you provide.

1. Create high expectations for every child, regardless of ability, to reach his or her full potential.
2. Develop a program philosophy on inclusion to ensure shared assumptions and beliefs about inclusion, and to identify quality inclusive practices.
3. Establish a system of services and supports that reflects the needs of children with varying types of disabilities and learning characteristics, with inclusion as the driving principle and foundation for all of these services and supports.
4. Revise program and professional standards to incorporate key dimensions of high quality inclusion.
5. Improve professional development across all sectors of the early childhood field by determining the following: who would benefit from professional development on inclusion; what practitioners need to know and be able to do in inclusive settings; and what methods are needed to facilitate learning opportunities related to inclusion.
6. Revise federal and state accountability systems to reflect both the need to increase the number of children with disabilities enrolled in inclusive programs as well as to improve the quality and outcomes of inclusion.

EMBEDDING INCLUSION IN TRAINING

It is fortunate to be facing this need for knowledgeable practitioners at a time when professional development and early childhood career paths are at the forefront of states' agendas. The logical avenue for accomplishment of the goal of creating knowledgeable practitioners is through these emerging systems of professional development. You may not be surprised to learn that this movement has led to early childhood and early intervention/special education organizations advocating for inclusive early childhood education and *ending* the separation of early childhood from inclusion education.

BASIC RESPONSIBILITIES OF TRAINERS

To begin embedding inclusion in your training events, you can:

~ Conduct training sessions and classes in accessible locations. This sounds simple enough but it is often overlooked. While few early childhood teachers have disabilities, we can "model what we teach" by conducting training in comfortable and accessible meeting rooms and classrooms, whenever possible.

~ Ask a question about necessary accommodations on registration materials. Doing this lets participants know that you are ready to support anyone who might need extra help to participate in the session.

~ Include frequent instruction on how to access current information, support, and community resources. No matter how little you know about inclusion of young children with disabilities, you can offer resources related to the topic. It is very important that child care providers become familiar with programs in their communities that provide specialized services for young children and families.

~ Invite guest speakers and develop panel presentations that introduce participants to individuals and families who have rich experience with young children with disabilities and successful inclusion practices. No matter how skilled you may be, bringing in the experts accomplishes at least two ends: 1) it helps participants become familiar with these individuals in person and ultimately broadens the base of support and 2) it enhances the learning experience by presenting positive models.

STRATEGIES FOR EMBEDDING INCLUSION

Once you have accomplished the basics, you are ready to explore further ways to embed inclusion practices and principles within every topic you teach. You can start by examining training materials, such as handouts, videos, texts, and supporting materials, as well as course curricula and the learning environment. When inclusion is naturally embedded in professional development, you:

~ Imperceptibly weave how to include children with a variety of abilities and interests throughout instruction in appropriate early childhood practices. Even if you only include one idea, you demonstrate your acceptance of differences and acknowledge that some participants may be working with children who may have special or unfamiliar needs.

~ Regularly embrace diversity in your presentation and learning activities, and display appropriate pictures, posters, and quotes. This not only illustrates that children have diverse strengths, needs, and interests but different family configurations, skin color, cultures, gender, etc.

~ Naturally include examples, stories, and pictures of children with and without developmental delays, whenever examples, stories, or pictures are included. These examples do not have to focus on the child with a disability but should show that having a disability is part of everyday life.

~ Value and promote family-centered practices. A key aspect of quality programs, effective partnerships with families become even more critical when a child has developmental delays or disabilities.

~ Consistently emphasize the importance of individualizing for each young child, especially those who may have unfamiliar or extraordinary developmental or medical needs. At the same time, be sure to teach strategies for meaningfully including each child and family in program activities.

~ Frequently engage participants in collaborative small group activities. Working with team members is a key component of early intervention and special education services. Collaboration skills need to be taught, practiced, and used as an integral component of being an early childhood professional.

MORE STRATEGIES

As you learn more about early childhood inclusion methods and approaches, you will become prepared to naturally include other aspects of inclusion in the professional development experiences you offer. You will likely be able to:

~ Help participants understand and value the synergistic relationship between their growing knowledge of developmentally appropriate early childhood practices and inclusion practices. Time after time, as teachers become aware, they express surprise that inclusion is so completely grounded in the quality early childhood practices they are already implementing. They are relieved to discover that inclusion is accomplished one child at a time. They begin to appreciate ways to combine their interest in young children with

their desire to teach this child. They are reassured that they do not have to know everything about every child with a disability; they just need to know what this child in their program right now needs to grow, develop, and belong.

~ Use the most recent terminology and appropriate person-first language for referring to children with disabilities (for example, child who is blind rather than blind child). This is called child-first language. It is also more correct to describe what a child has rather than what a child is (for example, a child has autism rather than is autistic).

~ Knowledgeably address the history of inclusion practices, relevant disability legislation (IDEA, ADA), and education requirements (IEP, IFSP) to underscore key points and address participants' interests. If you do not recognize these acronyms, look them up on a friendly web site and learn what they mean for young children and their families.

~ Actively teach the process for making referrals when a child's development does not match his or her age level. First, let participants know that every state engages in child-find activities. Child Find is a continuous process of public awareness activities, screening, and evaluation designed to *locate, identify, and refer as early as possible* all young children with disabilities and their families who are in need of an early intervention program or preschool special education (Part B/619) services. The least providers can do is let families know about this service.

Second, teach the process for working with parents and professionals to refer a child for evaluation. Child care providers are in an ideal position to observe young children's growth and progress. A provider might be the first person, besides the parents, who suspects a child is not developing as expected for his or her age. Providers need to pay attention to their concerns because children who have developmental delays or significant behavioral challenges benefit from the earliest possible intervention. (See Tip Sheet #13.)

~ Systematically introduce the roles of early intervention and special education professionals, therapists, and other specialists and what they can do to support teachers and children. Provide learning opportunities that focus on what it means to be part of

a child's team and participate in the creation and implementation of children's developmental plans.

ONE MORE THING

Session or course revision is not about adding information about all the possible disabilities that may exist in young children. Inclusive instruction focuses primarily on helping participants learn to individualize no matter what the child's needs are. It provides learning activities to help participants access the resources and support that already exist for young children with disabilities and their families.

It may take a bit of work on your part to make an existing presentation or curriculum inclusive. You must examine session outlines, handouts, texts, and accompanying learning activities to identify and then revise areas where it seems natural and appropriate. To start with, look for references to becoming informed about—and responsive to—diversity in any form (which typically includes culture and ethnicity) and simply embed disability practices as well.

To showcase inclusion in natural ways no matter what the topic, you can:

~ Display samples of materials that are already inclusive, such as policy manuals and program handbooks and visiting inclusive observation and practicum sites.

~ Expand content and context to include a wider range of children's abilities.

~ Create activities that help participants explore ways to effectively respond to a broad range of developmental diversity.

CONCLUSION

More and more child care providers and other early childhood professionals are participating in training and higher education experiences. Embedding inclusion in existing professional development experiences provides natural supports for the early care and education community. And ultimately it expands options for community-based child care for families of young children with disabilities and/or developmental delays that need or want child care.

Trainers and instructors no longer have the luxury of "letting someone else (or some other department) deal with inclusion issues." You must begin today to embed inclusion issues in every educational experience you offer (when appropriate) to address the real-world needs of young children and their families. This approach to supporting and promoting inclusion of young children with disabilities in early childhood programs educates their teachers in existing professional development experiences that are themselves inclusive of inclusion practices. ~

RESOURCES*

* *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)*. This position statement can be found at www.naeyc.org.

* *Tip Sheet #13 - Making referrals: What to do with your concerns about a child's development or behavior*. This and many other tip sheets on inclusion practices can be found at www.cplus.org.

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