

# 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)

Field Review: October 28- December 15, 2008

This document is being disseminated in draft form to elicit input. The field review period is from October 28 through December 15, 2008. Please provide feedback via electronic survey at <http://community.fpg.unc.edu/discussions/inclusion-position-statement>. Alternatively, you may submit written comments to Camille Catlett via email at [catlett@mail.fpg.unc.edu](mailto:catlett@mail.fpg.unc.edu) or fax to 919-843-5784.

Today an ever-increasing number of infants and young children with disabilities<sup>1</sup> play, develop, and learn together with their typically developing peers in a wide variety of places – at home, in early childhood programs, in neighborhoods, and in other community-based settings. The notion that young children with disabilities and their families are full members of the community reflects societal values about promoting opportunities for development and learning in normal environments and a sense of belonging for every child. It also reflects a reaction against previous educational practices of separating and isolating children with disabilities. Over time, in combination with certain regulations and protections under the law, these values and societal views toward children birth to 8 with disabilities and their families have come to be known as early childhood inclusion.<sup>2</sup> The most far-reaching effect of federal legislation on inclusion enacted over the past three decades has been to fundamentally change the way in which early childhood services ideally can be organized and delivered for this population.<sup>3</sup> However, because inclusion takes many different forms and implementation is influenced by a wide variety of factors, questions persist about the precise meaning of inclusion and its implications for policy, practice, and potential outcomes for children and families.

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase “children with special needs” is sometimes used in place of the phrase “children with disabilities.”

<sup>2</sup> The term “inclusion” may be used in a broader context relative to opportunities and access for children who are culturally and linguistically diverse, a critically important topic in early childhood requiring further discussion and inquiry. However, this position statement is more narrowly focused on the inclusion of infants and children with disabilities and their families.

<sup>3</sup> Corresponding federal legislation applied to infants and toddlers (children birth to 3) and their families specified that early intervention services and supports must be provided in “natural environments,” generally interpreted to mean a broad range of contexts and activities that normally occur for typically developing infants and toddlers in homes and communities. Although this document focuses on the broader meaning and implications of early childhood inclusion for children birth to eight, it is recognized that the basic ideas and values reflected in the term “inclusion” are congruent with those reflected in the term “natural environments.” Furthermore, it is acknowledged that fundamental concepts related to both inclusion and natural environments extend well beyond the early childhood period to include older elementary school students and beyond.

The lack of a shared national definition has contributed to misunderstandings about inclusion. The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) recognize that having a common understanding of what inclusion means is fundamentally important for determining what types of practices and supports are necessary to achieve high quality inclusion. This DEC and NAEYC joint position statement offers a definition of early childhood inclusion. The definition was designed not as a litmus test for determining whether a program can be considered inclusive, but rather, as a blueprint for identifying the key components of high quality inclusive programs. In addition, this document offers recommendations for how the position statement can be used by families, practitioners, administrators, policy makers, and others to improve early childhood services.

### **A Definition of Early Childhood Inclusion**

The definition of early childhood inclusion is as follows:

***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 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 include (1) access, (2) participation, and (3) supports.***

- (1) **Access.** Providing access to a wide range of learning opportunities, activities, settings, and environments is a defining feature of high quality early childhood inclusion. Inclusion may take many different forms and may occur in various organizational and community contexts, such as homes, Head Start, child care, faith-based programs, recreational programs, preschool, public pre-kindergarten through early elementary education, and blended early childhood education/early childhood special education programs. The concept of universal design can support access to physical environments and to learning opportunities within all of these contexts and settings. Universal design means removing barriers to children’s participation in learning by designing development and activities that are accessible to *all* children. Universal design principles help to ensure that all young children – those with disabilities and those who are typically developing – have access to learning environments, to normal home or educational routines and activities, and to the general education curriculum. These principles help shape education and intervention practices that promote multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement. New and varied technologies can help enable children with a range of functional capabilities to participate in activities and experiences in inclusive settings.

- (2) **Participation.** Adults promote belonging, participation, and engagement of children with disabilities and their typically developing peers in inclusive settings in a variety of intentional ways. Depending on the individual needs and priorities of young children and families, implementation of inclusion involves a range of approaches in a variety of settings – from embedded, routines-based teaching to more explicit interventions – to scaffold learning and participation for all children. Tiered models in early childhood hold promise for helping adults organize assessments and interventions by level of intensity for infants and young children who need additional supports to learn and develop. Facilitation of social-emotional development and appropriate behaviors is a critical component of high quality early childhood inclusion, along with the promotion of learning and development in all other domains.
- (3) **Supports.** An infrastructure of inclusion supports must be in place to undergird the efforts of individuals and organizations providing inclusive services to children and families. For example, family members, practitioners, specialists, and administrators should have access to ongoing professional development and support to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to implement effective inclusive practices. Because collaboration among key stakeholders (e.g., families, practitioners, specialists, and administrators) is a cornerstone for implementing high quality early childhood inclusion, resources and program policies are needed to promote multiple opportunities for communication and collaboration among these groups. Specialized services and therapies must be implemented in a coordinated fashion and integrated with general early care and education services. Blended early childhood education/early childhood special education programs offer one example of how this might be achieved. Funding policies should promote the pooling of resources and the use of incentives to increase access to high quality inclusive opportunities. Quality frameworks (e.g., program quality standards, early learning standards and guidelines, and professional competencies and standards) should reflect and guide inclusive content and practices to ensure that all early childhood practitioners and programs are prepared to address the needs and priorities of infants and young children with disabilities and their families.

### **Recommendations for Using this Position Statement to Improve Early Childhood Services**

Reaching consensus on the meaning of early childhood inclusion is a necessary first step in articulating the field's collective wisdom and values on this critically important issue. In addition, an agreed-upon definition of inclusion, such as the one included in this position statement, can be used to create high expectations for infants and young children with disabilities and to shape educational policies and practices that support high quality inclusion in a wide range of early childhood programs and settings.

Recommendations for using this position statement to accomplish these goals include:

- (1) **Create high expectations for every child to reach his or her full potential.** A definition of early childhood inclusion can help create high expectations for every child, regardless

of ability, to reach his or her full potential. Shared expectations can, in turn, lead to the selection of appropriate goals and support efforts to advocate for high quality inclusion among families of young children with disabilities, the practitioners who serve children and families, and the individuals and organizations who advocate on their behalf.

- (2) ***Develop a program philosophy on inclusion.*** An agreed-upon definition of inclusion can be used by a wide variety of early childhood programs to develop their own philosophy on inclusion. Programs need a philosophy of inclusion as a part of their broader program mission statement to ensure that practitioners and staff operate under a similar set of assumptions, values, and beliefs about the most effective ways to support infants and young children with disabilities and their families. A program philosophy on inclusion can be used to shape practices aimed at ensuring that infants and young children with disabilities and their families are full members of the early childhood community and that children have multiple opportunities to learn, develop, and form positive peer relationships.
- (3) ***Revise program and professional standards.*** A definition of inclusion could be used as the basis for revising program and professional standards to incorporate high quality inclusive practices. Because existing early childhood program standards primarily reflect the needs of the general population of young children, improving the overall quality of an early childhood classroom might not be sufficient to address the individual needs of children with developmental delays, cerebral palsy, Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), and other disabilities. A shared definition of inclusion could be used as the foundation for identifying dimensions of high quality inclusive programs and the professional standards and competencies of practitioners who work in these settings.
- (4) ***Achieve an integrated professional development system.*** An agreed-upon definition of inclusion can be used by states to promote an integrated system of high quality professional development to support the inclusion of young children with disabilities and their families. The development of such a system would require strategic planning and commitment on the part of key stakeholders across various early childhood sectors (e.g., higher education, child care, Head Start, public pre-kindergarten, preschool, early intervention, and families). Shared assumptions about the meaning of inclusion are critical for determining who would benefit from professional development, what practitioners would need to know and be able to do, and how professional development would be organized and facilitated as part of an integrated professional development system.
- (5) ***Influence federal and state accountability systems.*** Consensus on the meaning of inclusion could influence federal and state accountability standards related to increasing the number of children with disabilities enrolled in inclusive programs. Currently, states are required to report annually to the U.S. Department of Education the number of children with disabilities who are participating in inclusive early childhood programs. But the emphasis on the prevalence of children who receive inclusive services ignores the

quality and the anticipated outcomes of the services that children experience. Furthermore, the emphasis on prevalence data raises questions about which types of programs and experiences can be considered inclusive in terms of the intensity of inclusion and the optimal proportion of children with and without disabilities within these settings and activities. A shared definition of inclusion could be used to revise accountability systems to address both the need to increase the number of children with disabilities who receive inclusive services and the goal of improving the quality and outcomes associated with inclusion.

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