



**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

***POLICY STATEMENT ON
INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN
EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS***

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

September 14, 2015

This year our country proudly celebrates the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the 40th anniversary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the 50th anniversary of Head Start. All three efforts have been transformative in ensuring equal opportunity for all Americans. While tremendous progress has been made, the anniversaries of these laws are cause for reflection on the work that lies ahead. Children with disabilities and their families continue to face significant barriers to accessing inclusive high-quality early childhood programs and too many preschool children with disabilities are only offered the option of receiving special education services in settings separate from their peers without disabilities. This lag in inclusive opportunities is troubling for many reasons:

- Being meaningfully included as a member of society is the first step to equal opportunity, one of America's most cherished ideals, and is every person's right – a right supported by our laws.
- Research indicates that meaningful inclusion is beneficial to children with and without disabilities across a variety of developmental domains.
- Preliminary research shows that operating inclusive early childhood programs is not necessarily more expensive than operating separate early childhood programs for children with disabilities.
- Meaningful inclusion in high-quality early childhood programs can support children with disabilities in reaching their full potential resulting in broad societal benefits.

It is the Departments' position that all young children with disabilities should have access to inclusive high-quality early childhood programs, where they are provided with individualized and appropriate support in meeting high expectations. To further this position, the Departments' policy statement on the inclusion of young children with disabilities in early childhood programs:

- Sets an expectation for high-quality inclusion in early childhood programs;
- Highlights the legal and research foundations supporting inclusion; and
- Provides recommendations to States, local educational agencies (LEAs), schools, and early childhood programs for increasing inclusive early learning opportunities for all children.

education and related services in public or private general early childhood programs, including Head Start and Early Head Start programs, and community-based child care programs.

- The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability. HHS and ED's Section 504 regulations require recipients such as schools to provide equal educational opportunities for children with disabilities in the most integrated setting appropriate to the child's needs.
- The Head Start Act and the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act have specific provisions that support high-quality early learning opportunities for children with disabilities.

Challenges to Inclusion

Attitudes and Beliefs: These are the most frequently reported barrier to early childhood inclusion, and may be influenced by misinformation of the feasibility of inclusion, resistance to changing existing practices, stereotyping of children with disabilities, and lack of awareness of the benefits for all children.

IDEA Interpretation and Perceived Barriers: Some jurisdictions misinterpret IDEA's Part C natural environment provision as only allowing early intervention services to be provided in children's homes, and not in community settings where typically developing children are included. Other jurisdictions misinterpret IDEA's free appropriate public education (FAPE) and LRE requirements as only allowing IDEA preschool special education services to be delivered in preschool programs operated in a public school building.

Lack of Expertise of the Early Childhood Workforce: Early childhood providers and teachers may lack knowledge and competencies in child development, early childhood pedagogy, and individualizing instruction. This affects all children and presents a challenge to high-quality inclusive early learning.

Lack of Comprehensive Services: The systems that provide services to young children often deliver services in separate settings. The lack of delivery of comprehensive supports in early childhood programs may be a barrier to the full participation and success of children with disabilities in inclusive settings.

Limited Time and Commitment to Build Partnerships: A key ingredient to successful inclusion is a strong partnership between general early childhood programs and early intervention and early childhood special education providers. Many communities believe in the importance of inclusion but have made little progress due to limited planning time or a lack of commitment and support from leaders.

Building a Culture of Inclusion

Addressing the barriers to inclusion in early childhood programs and ensuring individualized supports to children with disabilities requires a community-based approach that brings families, advocates, developmental specialists, early childhood programs, schools, LEAs, communities and States leaders together to build a culture of inclusion, supported by the empirical and legal foundations of inclusion. A culture of inclusion sets the stage for the recommendations provided in the Federal policy statement and is the first step to reaching the ultimate vision of providing access to inclusive high-quality early learning opportunities for all children.

State Recommendations

1. **Create a State-Level Interagency Task Force and Plan for Inclusion:** States should leverage existing early childhood councils or taskforces and create or strengthen a focus on early childhood inclusion. This council should build on existing early childhood efforts, bring partners together, co-create a written vision statement for early childhood inclusion, and carry out an inclusion State plan.

should build staff's capacity to form strong goal-oriented relationships with families that are linked to their child's learning, development, and wellness.

2. **Adhere to Legal Provisions of Supports and Services in Inclusive Settings with IFSPs/IEPs:** LEAs, schools, and other local early intervention service providers should review their IFSP/IEP processes to ensure that inclusive settings are meaningfully discussed for each child.
3. **Assess and Improve the Quality of Inclusion in Early Childhood Programs:** Pair children's assessments with environmental assessments of their early childhood programs to ensure that there are appropriate accommodations and modifications to support children in reaching their goals.
4. **Review and Modify Resource Allocation:** LEAs, schools, and early childhood programs can examine the ways they allocate funds that serve children with disabilities and modify them to promote inclusion.
5. **Enhance Professional Development:** A high-quality staff should have knowledge, competencies, and positive attitudes and beliefs about inclusion and disability in order to foster the development of all children. Specifically:
 - *LEA Administrators, Early Childhood Directors and Principals* should participate in professional development focused on the research on inclusion, establishing a culture of inclusion and enacting strong inclusive policies, and practical resource allocation strategies that support inclusion. Leaders should require staff to engage in professional development specific to inclusion and supporting the learning and developmental needs of children with disabilities.
 - *Teachers and Providers* should have the skills necessary to meet the learning needs of all children. All professional development opportunities offered to early childhood staff should incorporate how the content applies and can be individualized for children with disabilities.
 - *Early interventionists, Special Educators and Related Service Personnel* should deliver services to children with disabilities in early childhood settings that are embedded in everyday routines; and/or co-teach and coach early childhood teachers and providers to encourage inclusive educational environments, as opposed to focusing on working with children in separate settings or pulling children out of their settings for specialized instruction, as a first option.
6. **Establish an Appropriate Staffing Structure and Strengthen Staff Collaboration:** LEAs, schools, and early childhood programs should shift existing resources and systems to establish staffing structures and increase staff collaboration to better support inclusion. Early childhood programs could consist of a skilled teacher or provider and an aide, supported by specialized service providers. Programs should also have a disability or inclusion coordinator.
7. **Ensure Access to Specialized Supports:** Early childhood programs and schools should have access to specialized supports delivered by experts. These specialized supports can increase the quality of early learning experiences for *all* children.
8. **Develop Formal Collaborations with Community Partners:** Early childhood programs and schools should establish formal agreements with service providers in their community to ensure alignment and delivery of comprehensive services.