

Quality Inclusive Early Childhood Programs: 10 Things to Look For

by Donna Nylander

In most families, the first day of school triggers excitement and anxiety. In families who choose an inclusive setting for their child with disabilities there is concern about their child being accepted, the program seeing their child's strengths as well as challenges, and the program's readiness to welcome a child with special needs. Recent research has taught us that when children with special needs learn alongside their typically-developing peers,

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everyone benefits. Inclusive settings should be the first option to be considered for young children with disabilities.

But what should parents look for as they seek quality inclusive early childhood programs for their child? And what should educators aim for in shaping quality inclusive programs? Listed below are 10 questions to ask about a program and corresponding indicators of a quality inclusive program. They are adapted and expanded from indicators developed by Dr. Mary Beth Bruder (see Bruder 1993):

❑ **Does your program have a philosophy/mission for inclusive practices?** The program that operates from a set of well-defined core values and expectations supporting inclusion generates a positive attitude and provides services that are effective for both children and families. Characteristics to look for include:

- The atmosphere is welcoming, respectful, and accepting of children with special needs and their families.
- A mission statement is visible and reflects the value of all children and the involvement of families.
- The program provides a natural environment with typical peers in which both groups are learning together.

❑ **Do administrators and staff have an inclusive attitude and spirit?**

When staff and administrators are comfortable in inclusive settings, they accept children as children first, and then accommodate their special needs. It's important to know that it's okay for a teacher to be apprehensive. The idea of including children with disabilities may have teachers feeling inadequate to accommodate their needs. But, they often learn most of their concerns never materialize and a child with a disability becomes just "one of the kids in the class." Teachers will be surprised to find themselves more creative when planning for a child with a disability. As one teacher has said, "A different child brings forth a different teacher" (Family Child Learning Center, 1997). Characteristics to look for include:

- People-first language is used, emphasizing the person, not the label, and what the child *has*, not what the child *is* (example: "Grant has Autism" *not* "Grant's Autistic"; "Tia receives special education services" *not* "She is special ed").
- Teachers include children in conversations, answer questions as they come up, and give simple and direct responses.
- Staff and administrators advocate for inclusion by educating parents of typical children that all children benefit from inclusion and all will learn

the value of accepting differences as well as their own uniqueness.

❑ **Do you have a consistent and on-going system for family involvement?** The family is the enduring and central force in the life of the child. Successful implementation of an inclusive model depends on a commitment to the family as the primary decision-maker and partner. Characteristics to look for include:

- Parent participation is encouraged.
- Teachers communicate with families daily/weekly through notebooks, e-mail or phone. They comment on strengths as well as expectations.
- Parent/teacher conferences are scheduled at least once a year and are also available upon request.
- The program has an open door policy: Parents are able to visit the school and classroom at any time.

❑ **Is team planning incorporated into the research-based curriculum?** The team approach is where members have opportunities to plan and problem-solve together. This is the necessary support that teachers need to be successful and feel competent. Team members share roles and responsibilities across disciplines. Teaming has been identified as an ideal component for inclusive models. It requires consistent collaboration and communication. Characteristics to look for include:

- Curriculum follows the same criteria found in quality programs for children with typical development. Classroom teams plan together on how to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of the child being included.
- Daily schedule has a balance of structured activities, hands-on learning, and daily outdoor time. Classroom staff are trained on how to follow-up

with therapists' recommendations throughout the daily routine.

- Schedules are posted, and there are opportunities for large group, small group, and individual time. Individual children may need a choice board or several repetitions of a skill to be successful. The team is responsible for posting a picture schedule for easy transitions between activities.
- Team planning/problem-solving meetings are ongoing.

❑ **Do you collaborate and communicate with agencies and other community partners?** School districts, agencies and programs should cooperate and collaborate for the benefit of the child. Characteristics to look for include:

- Communication, both formal and informal, is consistently maintained between the district and community agencies and programs.
- The program collaborates with community services and organizations for additional adult support, such as park districts for assistance with summer recreation programs.
- The program provides field trips/experiences in the community, which are important for learning about the world and providing families with ideas of where to take their child.

❑ **Does the Individualized Education Program (IEP) drive instruction?** The IEP is intended to be a planning document that shapes and guides the day-to-day provision of special education services. To this end, it is recommended that individualized goals are functional. This means that the goals are meaningful in the context of everyday experiences of the child, and embedded within daily activities and routines, rather than a listing of developmental skills the child has not yet mastered. Characteristics to look for include:

- IEP goals and objective updates are shared with parents and everyone who works with the child at least three times a year.

- Functional goals are written and are age-appropriate.
- Lack of toilet training does not keep a child from being accepted into a program. Toilet training is provided if it is part of a child's IEP.
- Activities should be child-centered and teacher-directed. The child's goals should be embedded into activities that he or she enjoys. The teacher may need to direct or set-up a situation for intentional teaching of the skill, but it is done in the context of an engaging activity for the child, as well as including typical peers in the activity for maximum enjoyment and learning.

❑ **Are you integrating service delivery into the daily schedule?** When services such as speech, occupational or physical therapy occur within a child's natural environment throughout typical routines and activities, they are able to capitalize on the child's interests, preferences, and actions. Characteristics to look for include:

- Services are integrated into the classroom. Therapists embed the goals into the daily schedule and incorporate typical peers in the activities.
- Classroom teams follow up with the goals designed by the therapists.
- There are enough materials for a variety of planned activities.

❑ **Is there a consistent and ongoing system for staff development?** The implementation of staff development programs should be planned carefully to incorporate effective procedures. All staff, including administrators, should be a part of the training efforts. Characteristics to look for include:

- Scheduled planning time for staff to specifically plan for individualized instruction.
- Professional development that is provided throughout the year on one specific topic. When staff are offered training for a complete year on the same topic it provides the trainer

numerous opportunities to teach the concepts in a variety of ways such as with the entire staff, in small focused groups, individual training opportunities, and onsite consultation. This year-long approach benefits all staff learning styles. It gives staff the time to reflect on their practices as well as having the assurance that the consultant will be returning to assist in the learning process.

- Training provided to all staff, as well as follow-up consultation with classroom teams and individual teachers.

❑ **Do the teachers have tools and strategies for addressing issues of disability and inclusion?** The teacher's task is to show all children how to work and play together. Characteristics to look for include:

- Teachers introduce disability awareness using children's books, puppets, dolls, and pictures before a child with special needs starts in the program.
- Teachers let all children explore equipment used by children with special needs.
- Children are paired as "buddies," giving them an organized way to get to know each other. The child with special needs should have a chance to be a helper in the buddy relationship, not only a recipient of assistance.

❑ **Is there a comprehensive system for evaluating the effectiveness of the program?** Evaluation of the inclusive early childhood program is important for purposes of improvement and expansion. It is recommended that the evaluation design be multi-dimensional. Characteristics to look for include:

- Evaluations by parents and staff should be analyzed yearly.
- Training for staff and parents should come from their choices.
- Evaluation of community perceptions of inclusion should be conducted and used as a basis for awareness-raising and education.

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- Evaluation of the communication approach with the school district should be conducted and a collaborative relationship encouraged for the district to assist with resources and supports while the child is in the typical environment with peers.

These indicators help ensure a quality early childhood program is provided to students with and without disabilities. Take the challenge to implement an inclusion program or find one for your child. The benefits outweigh the challenges. You will find the journey is worth it!

References

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