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)

Today an ever-increasing number of infants and young children with and without disabilities play, develop, and learn together in a variety of places – homes, early childhood programs, neighborhoods, and other community-based settings. The notion that young children with disabilities[1] and their families are full members of the community reflects societal values about promoting opportunities for development and learning, 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 regarding children birth to 8 with disabilities and their families have come to be known as early childhood inclusion.[2] 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.[3] 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.

The lack of a shared national definition has contributed to misunderstandings about inclusion. DEC and 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/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 should be used by families, practitioners, administrators, policy makers, and others to improve early childhood services.

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Definition of Early Childhood Inclusion

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. The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and supports.

What is meant by Access, Participation, and Supports?

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 can take many different forms and can occur in various organizational and community contexts, such as homes, Head Start, child care, faith-based programs, recreational programs, preschool, public and private pre-kindergarten through early elementary education, and blended early childhood education/early childhood special education programs. In many cases, simple modifications can facilitate access for individual children. Universal design is a concept that can be used to support access to environments in many different types of settings through the removal of physical and structural barriers. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) reflects practices that provide multiple and varied formats for instruction and learning. UDL principles and practices help to ensure that *every* young child has access to learning environments, to typical home or educational routines and activities, and to the general education curriculum. Technology can enable children with a range of functional abilities to participate in activities and experiences in inclusive settings.

Participation. Even if environments and programs are designed to facilitate access, some children will need additional individualized accommodations and supports to participate fully in play and learning activities with peers and adults. Adults promote belonging, participation, and engagement of children with and without disabilities in inclusive settings in a variety of intentional ways. Tiered models in early childhood hold promise for helping adults organize assessments and interventions by level of intensity. Depending on the individual needs and priorities of young children and families, implementing inclusion involves a range of approaches—from embedded, routines-based teaching to more explicit interventions—to scaffold learning and participation for all children. Social-emotional development and behaviors that facilitate participation are critical goals of high quality early childhood inclusion, along with learning and development in all other domains.

Supports. In addition to provisions addressing access and participation, an infrastructure of systems-level 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.[4] 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 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 should 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 should 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 the efforts of families, practitioners, individuals, and organizations to advocate for high quality inclusion.

2. ***Develop a program philosophy on inclusion.*** An agreed-upon definition of inclusion should be used by a wide variety of early childhood programs to develop their own philosophy on inclusion. Programs need a philosophy on 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 should 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 relationships.

3. ***Establish a system of services and supports.*** Shared understandings about the meaning of inclusion should be the starting point for creating a system of services and supports for children with disabilities and their families. Such a system must reflect a continuum of services and supports that respond to the needs and characteristics of children with varying types of disabilities and levels of severity, including children who are at risk for disabilities. However, the designers of these systems should not lose sight of inclusion as a driving principle and the foundation for the range of services and supports they provide to young children and families. Throughout the service and support system, the goal should be to ensure access, participation, and the infrastructure of supports needed to achieve the desired results related to inclusion. Ideally, the principle of natural proportions should guide the design of inclusive early childhood programs. The principle of natural proportions means the inclusion of children with disabilities in proportion to their presence in the general population. A system of supports and services should include incentives for inclusion, such as child care subsidies, and adjustments to staff-child ratios to ensure that program staff can adequately address the needs of every child.

4. ***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 is necessary, but might not be sufficient, to address the individual needs of every child. 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.

5. ***Achieve an integrated professional development system.*** An agreed-upon definition of inclusion should be used by states to promote an integrated system of high quality professional development to support the inclusion of young children with and without disabilities and their families. The development of such a system would require strategic planning and commitment on the part of families and other key stakeholders across various early childhood sectors (e.g., higher education, child care, Head Start, public pre-kindergarten, preschool, early intervention, health care, mental health). Shared assumptions about the meaning of inclusion are critical for determining who would benefit from professional development, what practitioners need to know and be able to do, and how learning opportunities are organized and facilitated as part of an integrated professional development system.

6. ***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 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.

Endnotes

1 Phrases such as “children with special needs” and “children with exceptionalities” are sometimes used in place of “children with disabilities.”

2 The term “inclusion” can be used in a broader context relative to opportunities and access for children from culturally and linguistically diverse groups, a critically important topic in early childhood requiring further discussion and inquiry. It is now widely acknowledged, for example, that culture has a profound influence on early development and learning, and that early care and education practices must reflect this influence. Although this position statement is more narrowly focused on inclusion as it relates to disability, it is understood that children with disabilities and their families vary widely with respect to their racial/ethnic, cultural, economic, and linguistic backgrounds.

3 In accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), children ages 3-21 are entitled to a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). LRE requires that, to the extent possible, children with disabilities should have access to the general education curriculum, along with learning activities and settings that are available to their peers without disabilities. Corresponding federal legislation applied to infants and toddlers (children birth to 3) and their families specifies that early intervention services and supports must be provided in “natural environments,” generally interpreted to mean a broad range of contexts and activities that generally 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.

4 Blended programs integrate key components (e.g., funding, eligibility criteria, curricula) of two or more different types of early childhood programs (e.g., the federally funded program for preschoolers with disabilities [Part B-619] in combination with Head Start, public pre-k, and/or child care) with the goal of serving a broader group of children and families within a single program.

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