

A Journey Towards Inclusion

by Kate Jordan-Downs

For as long as I can remember, I have been disturbed by how people tend to exclude others who look, speak, believe, or behave differently. I heard the jeers made by classmates about my father's physical disability; listened to my friend, Sarah, repeat back a joke that someone told at her expense, yet convinced her it was funny; and worked with countless families searching for an early childhood program that would welcome their child rather than slam the door in their faces. All of these experiences, and countless more, have led me to work to bring about a spirit of inclusion rather than exclusion.

As early childhood educators and leaders, we hold immense power and responsibility in our hands. We have the ability to impact the earliest experi-



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working with adults with disabilities in their homes and communities, and leading as the program director for two nonprofit, inclusive early childhood programs in Washington, DC. In her current position, she is redefining the vision for inclusive education. She is committed to ensuring that all children have a safe and respectful environment where they can build the self-confidence necessary to learn and grow, as well as celebrate the diversity they contribute to their school community.



ences of entire generations, which will set children on paths that influence how children view themselves, others, and the world around them. With this power, we must commit to creating equal opportunity for all children to grow and learn, so that they will be equipped to become engaged members of their communities. By welcoming children of all abilities and life experiences, we take the first step in changing the general belief that high-quality early learning settings are only available to certain children. We are sending a message that each child is not only welcome, but a valued member of their center family — a message that will positively influence their growing sense of self-worth.

The Evolution of Inclusion

For most professionals in early childhood education, the first thing that comes to mind when hearing 'inclusion' is supporting children with diag-

nosed disabilities in a classroom. And that's correct. Diagnosed disabilities, disorders, and developmental delays are at the heart of historical legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These laws were designed to protect adults and children with disabilities from discrimination so that they have access to equal educational and life opportunities. Just this past September, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education released their joint policy statement on the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings, in the hopes of increasing the number of infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children with disabilities in high-quality programs.¹

However, the concept of inclusion should not be solely reserved for those with disabilities. Sadly, data has shown

and continues to show that preschool disciplinary practices (such as suspensions and expulsions) are fraught with racial, gender, and disability disparities and these disparities do not change in K-12 data. In fact, after the release of the 2011-2012 U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Snapshot on early childhood disciplinary practices, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education issued a joint statement on expulsion and suspension policies in early childhood settings.²

Take a moment and let this reality sink in — the reality that our federal agencies have to issue statements about the policies early childhood programs should implement regarding the expulsion of... three year olds. In the words of Dr. Walter Gilliam, “what makes less sense than expelling a preschooler?”³ Yet this is our reality and one that the early childhood field must face, not just out of compliance, but because we must do better. We must change the status quo, but how?

**Celeste Dills,
Inclusion Services Specialist:**

My daily conversations give me the opportunity to support our educators by providing them the tools needed to advance learning for children of all abilities. Many of the conversations we have come from children who exhibit challenging behavior. Guiding teachers through the journey from a child’s perspective is a deep and heartfelt experience. There is a moment of understanding that connects the teacher to the reasoning behind why the tools work. That moment is when they begin to see results and you hear the joy in their voice as they share the magic of the child’s success.

What Are the Barriers?

Why is the practice of inclusion so difficult? For one thing, as many teachers and center directors will tell you, the training and resources about working with children who have unique needs are scarce. Although there are many state and local licensing regulations that require professional development opportunities for early childhood educators, including training opportunities on how to support children with unique needs, not enough time is allotted to practice the implementation of this new knowledge in the classroom. In addition, many early childhood centers do not have access to the support from specialists such as therapists, mental-health consultants, or one-to-one special instructors in the classroom. Unlike our K-12 counterparts, we are rarely afforded the support services and personnel prescribed in a child’s Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Program (IEP), leaving teachers overwhelmed as they try to meet the goals outlined in these plans, and children without the proper support they need to be successful in the classroom.

As we continue to advocate for the necessary training and resources to support our teachers and children in early childhood settings, we must also put as much effort into shifting the attitudes and hearts of early childhood educators so that they will work harder to support all children in our programs. Even with the best training and resources available, if an educator’s heart is not invested in supporting all children — in even the most challenging circumstances — then those trainings and resources will make little impact.

Teaching children with disabilities and those who have lived through adverse childhood experiences (ACE) is not easy. It challenges us to constantly adjust our teaching practices, to reframe our perception of a child’s behavior, and to fight the

**Taunya Couch,
Inclusion Services Specialist:**

Every day, I have the opportunity to support our centers by finding workable options to meet the needs of the children in our care. These strategies span a wide spectrum of needs, such as determining the best way to introduce a child with limited mobility or adaptive equipment to her prekindergarten peers, reviewing behavior logs to help teachers further develop behavior support strategies, or training teachers on working with children with autism in the ECE classroom. At the heart of all our conversations are the needs of each unique child and the desire to partner with their families, schools, and service providers to determine the ways we can best meet those needs.

constant thought that we cannot reach each child. However, working with children with unique needs also has rewards beyond measure. Our teaching practices improve, benefiting all children; we stay immersed in the latest research and strategies from our field; and we become champions for children in desperate need of an army of advocates. There is no better feeling than seeing a child walk or talk for the first time when all the odds were against her, or to see a child who struggled with self-regulation and challenging behaviors become a leader amongst his peers. Every child deserves to have a place that will encourage and support them as they encounter and struggle with obstacles.

Making Inclusion Happen

Centralized Inclusion Team

One way to approach inclusion is to develop what we call our centralized Inclusion Services team. Some of our

early childhood education professionals have worked directly with children with unique needs, but many have not. The Inclusion Services team offers a helpline that directors and teachers can call anytime they have questions regarding the care and education of a child with unique needs or challenging behaviors. These questions are specific to the situation and can range from how to meet the needs of a newly-enrolled child with autism to how to successfully transition a child with cerebral palsy from a toddler to a preschool classroom.

Identify the Champions of Inclusive Practices

Kayte Lucas, the Center Director at a KinderCare in Vancouver, Washington, has created an inclusive community and culture in her center. Lucas says that her mantra to teachers and families is “we do not give up on children — no matter what.” Her talent in supporting children of all abilities is something that we encourage other center directors to learn from. Having a colleague who can support our journey to inclusion is imperative — we cannot do it alone. Kayte’s expertise is comprised of her passion for her work and the years of experience she has gained by fighting to create an environment where every child can be successful, and she graciously shares her knowledge with other educators. Here is a little about her story.

When she was just four years old, Center Director Kayte Lucas hit another child in the face — and broke his nose. “I was one of *those kids*,” she says. She remembers how it felt to be misunderstood as a child: the ‘problem kid’ labels, the negative attention, how her family worried. But it’s precisely those early experiences that make her so dedicated to helping children with challenging behaviors today. “Every child is valuable and every child is valued here,” she says. Anger, aggression, furniture climbing, biting, chair throwing: this

Here are a few things Kayte shared about celebrating individual differences and the power of positivity to help children be successful in an inclusive environment.

- **Know the child and the family completely.** Once families know I am never going to dis-enroll their children, they open up. That gives me a lot of information about what might be happening at home.
- **Separate the challenge from the child.** There is always a reason for challenging or aggressive behavior. Some challenges are obvious because they are related to the child’s diagnosis; however, some are not as easy to pinpoint. He or she may be hungry, tired, or having difficulty with transitions. Maybe there is a separation in the family. Looking for the ‘why’ helps you solve the issue compassionately.
- **Chart the challenges.** We use a chart that divides the day into several specific time frames: morning group, transitions to nap, nap time, afternoon time. This is a very powerful tool, because it helps us begin to notice patterns of behavior. Does the child begin to get overwhelmed at the end of the day? Is the transition to nap time when the child tends to throw toys and hit?
- **Anticipate and act.** Once you know the child and her patterns, you learn to be proactive. If fatigue sets in for a child with a mobility impairment right before lunch, make sure that child is settled at the table before the others. If a child with ADHD struggles with the transition to outdoor time, be prepared to redirect the child or intervene before the behavior occurs. Watch body language and facial expressions. There are always cues before a behavior happens; you just have to observe closely to catch them.
- **Focus on the positive.** The time-frame chart also helps prove to us that no child is always struggling — not even the most challenging child. By keeping this chart, we can see that every child has a period of time when they are actively engaged and successful in the classroom. When we talk to parents, we always start with something positive, such as “He had three good mornings in a row this week!”
- **Stay flexible and choose your battles.** No two children are the same. An individual rewards system may work with one child, while another may respond to jokes and humor. I have one child who has to move everywhere all the time. He cannot do circle time. But if you ask him a question, he can tell you the answer, proving that he is listening and learning. So we let him roam. Keep trying until you find the solution that works.
- **Communicate proactively with parents.** When there are challenges with a child successfully participating in the classroom, we are completely transparent with all parents about what happened, what we did about it, and what we’re going to do to prevent this challenge in the future. That shows we’re quickly resolving concerns, and it goes a long way.
- **Hire with heart.** I listen for two things in an interview. I want to hear prospective employees speak positively about differences, and I want to hear that a candidate handles discipline differently, depending on the child. I look for staff who share my spirit of inclusion: it’s a must in my center.

center has plenty of 'those kids.' But to Kayte, these are merely behaviors that children present in an effort to communicate something that is causing them distress. There are practical solutions to challenging behaviors once you know the root cause. "Behaviors do not define who a child is or his future potential," she says. She believes that these children deserve a great education and compassionate, kind teachers just as much as other children do. Families whose children require accommodations or additional support, or who exhibit challenging or aggressive behaviors, can struggle to find early childhood education centers that will accept their children. This can be very stressful and discouraging for parents. These children often get dis-enrolled and families whose kids have been dis-enrolled elsewhere feel like they've won the lottery when they find Kayte and her staff. At last, here is a place that doesn't see their children as a 'problem!'

Conclusion

Each day our families give us the opportunity to help shape their children's lives. When children come to us, they're essentially a blank canvas and they fully soak in every relationship and experience. As they get older, it is more difficult to shape their perspective about themselves and others, so it's imperative that their earliest learning experiences provide them with the opportunity to be included; to learn about differences in a positive way; and to come from a place of love and respect, so that as they grow they will begin to positively participate and be involved within their community. Children have the power to shape our world into one that is more inclusive. If we want to see a more inclusive world come about, all we must do is give them the foundational inclusive experiences they need to achieve it.

Endnotes

1 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education. Joint policy statement on the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings: www2.ed.gov/policy/spced/guid/earlylearning/joint-statement-full-text.pdf

2 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education. Joint statement on expulsion and suspension policies in early childhood settings: www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/policy-statement-ece-expulsions-suspensions.pdf

3 Gilliam, Walter:
<http://psychologybenefits.org/2014/12/13/preschool-expulsions/>

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Stef Plebanek, Inclusion Services Specialist:

In my role advising our centers how to include children with disabilities and/or challenging behaviors, I have the opportunity to help teachers and directors value the diversity that children with a range of abilities bring to our centers, rather than seeing them as detracting from the orderly operations of their classrooms. When classrooms are set up to help children of all abilities succeed, it is so gratifying to hear from new families that they love that the center seems to 'get' their child's unique needs and how teachers respond with enthusiasm, creativity, and insight.



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