

The Director's Toolbox for Including Children with Special Needs

by Linda Barker and Roberta Goldberg

Directors of early childhood programs are the 'frontline' for parents seeking admission for their children with identified special needs. In addition, developmental and behavioral issues that emerge after a child is enrolled in a program quickly come to the director's attention. Determining who can be included at a site, how to prepare the physical space and the staff for their inclusion, and how best to serve these children can be overwhelming. Directors face tremendous challenges trying to balance the financial realities of keeping an early care and education site



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while also recognizing staff's abilities to work with all children. All of these considerations weigh heavily on directors who have a heart for children and want to include and help them if they can.

The Frostig Consultation Department has worked over the past 30 years consulting and providing professional development in small and large child care centers, Head Start and Early Head Start centers, as well as with family child care providers as they meet the challenge of including children with special needs in their settings. Through this experience, we have developed several user-friendly tools that have proven helpful to directors and staff as they face tough enrollment or inclusion decisions.

Inclusion Considerations Inquiry

The first tool — **Inclusion Considerations Inquiry** — encourages a director and staff to carefully consider three components of successful inclusion decisions: Program considerations, child considerations, and parent considerations. Answers to these questions can guide an honest appraisal of the readiness of the particular site to embrace a child with special needs. It can also help a director begin to put in place the infrastructure required for inclusion and to

identify areas for staff development needed to achieve this goal.

1 — Program Considerations

Carefully consider the following questions:

- Have you had discussions with staff and parents about the benefits of inclusion?
- Do staff believe that all children can learn if individual needs are considered and adaptations are made to meet those needs?
- Have staff been trained to identify early warning signs and to work with young children with special needs as issues arise in child care?
- If staff need more training, do you have a specialist's or director's time to provide that?
- Have staff been trained to help children develop desirable behaviors (cooperation, self-esteem, problem-solving skills, etc.) and decrease undesirable behaviors (disruptiveness, distractibility)?
- Does the program curriculum include ways to help staff facilitate the adjustment of the child with special needs into the program as well as the adjustment of the typically developing children?
- If the child has a physical disability, can the space or setting accommodate for that?

- Does the setting have an established behavior management program that focuses on positive, rather than negative, behaviors?
- If necessary, are staff willing to allow an outside therapist or therapeutic companion to visit and work with the child during the program day?
- Does the setting adequately provide accessibility (removing physical barriers) and inclusion (removing social barriers) to meet the needs of a child with a special need?

2 — Child Considerations

Child care professionals might consider these variables and how they could impact their programs:

- What are the child's current language, thinking, interacting, and motor skills levels compared to those of the children who will be in the setting?
- How do the child's current skills compare to the expectations of the program?
- Does the child have any specific behavior difficulties that require a trained teacher to manage or change?
- Does the child need a specific behavior plan? Can that be accomplished in-house, or do you need to get an outside professional to help?
- Does the child have hearing or vision problems that need to be addressed?
- How independent is the child with adaptive skills (toileting, eating, dressing, etc.)?
- What is the child's skill level in following a program routine?
- Does your application and entry process provide you with the above information?

3 — Parent Considerations

Parents are a crucial factor in the long-term outcomes for their child and can make the decision to include a child easier or harder:

- Are the parents supportive and committed to the idea of a least restrictive environment for their child?
- Are the parents comfortable with the

proposed setting?

- Are the parents aware of the expectations and routines that will be part of the program for their child and for them?
- Are the parents aware that their child's adjustment to the new setting may or may not occur immediately?
- Do the parents have a support network of other parents experiencing the same situation?

Continuum of Adaptations Inventory — Implications for the Director

Once the decision to include a child has been made, another tool — the **Continuum of Adaptations Inventory** — helps teachers anticipate the kind of staffing, materials, and setting adjustments needed to include a child with special needs in their program. Recognition of where a child falls on this continuum provides teachers with a way to address the curricular and environmental needs of that child, while still attending to the other children in their care.

- **No Adaptation:** There may be no need to adapt the curriculum or environment to include a child with a special need.
- **Peer or Adult Assistance:** Pairing a child with a peer who can help them follow a routine, or make a transition, for instance, may be all that is needed for a child to be successful in the setting. Or, extra assistance from the teacher or aide may be required in order to include the child in an activity. This could include having the child sit on an adult's lap at circle time, having the child close to an adult during transitions, or providing extra help in an activity that is particularly challenging for the child.
- **Different Expectations:** It may become apparent that there needs to be different expectations for a child with special needs. It may be helpful for teachers to think about this as they might for including a younger child in their classroom. For instance, if a toddler were in a classroom with four year olds, he would

not be expected to clean up in the same way that his classmates would, or to remember the daily schedule without an adult to guide him physically and verbally.

- **Modified Materials:** It may be possible to include a child with special needs in a classroom by modifying the materials. For instance, if there is a writing and cutting activity, a child with fine motor challenges may need the following modifications to be successful: special scissors, larger writing tools, and/or the paper taped to the table. A child who uses a walker may need to have the table raised so she can just pull up to the table and lean on it, rather than sitting in a chair. A child with cerebral palsy may need to have more room between pieces of furniture to maneuver around or a stool or chair to sit on rather than on the floor at circle time.
- **Parallel Activity in the Same Environment:** Finally, to include a child in the setting the expectation may be that they are at the activity, but playing with something else. For instance, a child on the autism spectrum may be sitting near a group of children engaged in an activity, but focused on his own toy.

Stages of Concern — Implications for the Teacher

Directors also need to be mindful of where each teacher is in their abilities and confidence when dealing with a child with special needs. We have found in our work with directors and supervisors that a tool called **Stages of Concern** (Hall & Hord 1987) has been useful, not only to understand where teachers are in relation to this work, but also how to better support and mentor them (see box above).

It is often the case that the director has much more training and confidence in dealing with children with special needs than her staff and has the desire to include all children if possible. However,

staff may be at all different points with regard to inclusion. Something to keep in mind when reviewing the Stages of Concern is that there is no 'right place' to be in the stages; the tool is merely an indication of where a person is in relation to a proposed change. For our purposes, 'innovation' would translate to including children with special needs in the child care setting.

This assessment can help the director identify where staff are with respect to implementing inclusion in order to help them adjust to the necessary changes when including a child with special needs.

In summary, including children with special needs in the early childhood setting can be a rewarding experience for children, families, and staff. According to Mark Wolery of the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, both children with and without special needs clearly benefit from early inclusive environments. In addition, inclusion affects families and communities in positive

Stages of Concern Assessment: Typical Expressions of Concern about an Innovation

Stage of Concern	Expressions of Concern
6. Refocusing	I have some ideas about something that would work even better.
5. Collaboration	How can I relate what I am doing to what others are doing?
4. Consequence	How is my use affecting kids? How can I refine it to have more impact?
3. Management	I seem to be spending all my time getting materials ready.
2. Personal	How will doing it affect me?
1. Informational	I would like to know more about it.
0. Awareness	I am not concerned about it.

ways (Wolery & Wilbers, 1994). However, in order to set the stage for success, the process must be handled thoughtfully and realistically. The route suggested here includes taking into account program, child, and parent considerations through the **Inclusion Considerations Inquiry** exercise, using the **Continuum of Adaptations** to plan staffing and curriculum for an included child, and assessing where staff might be with the **Stages of Concern Assessment**. We all want children to experience success and families to feel included in all decisions regarding their

children. Following the process suggested here is one way to get there.

Reference

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- Wolery, M., & Wilbers, J. S. (Eds.). (1994). *Including Children with Special Needs in Early Childhood Programs* (pp.1-22). Washington DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.