

## Increasing Access to Inclusive Environments

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education have long demonstrated a commitment to the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood programs. With the 31<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the passing of the Individuals with Disabilities Act, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) recently renewed their commitment to inclusive early childhood programs and practices (Hamm, 2021). Research has shown that children with disabilities benefit from learning alongside their peers in high-quality inclusive settings. Holahan and Costenbader (2000) found that young children with disabilities in high-quality inclusive early childhood programs made larger gains in their cognitive, communication, and social-emotional development compared to their peers in segregated settings. In addition, inclusion has benefits for all children, not just children with disabilities. Young children without disabilities who participate in an inclusive classroom learn life skills such as empathy and compassion (Cross et al., 2004).



According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' and the U.S. Department of Education's (2015/2017) joint policy statement, all young children with disabilities should have access to inclusive high-quality education programs that provide them with individualized and appropriate support. While this is known best practice, families struggle to find inclusive early childhood programs. In 2018, children with disabilities attending an inclusive early childhood program at least 10 hours per week and receiving the majority of hours of special education and related services in the early childhood program accounted for only 40.2 percent of all children ages 3 through 5 served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Office of Special Education Programs, 2021). A larger portion of parents of children with disabilities face barriers in finding care, such as a lack of available slots, scheduling challenges, and concerns about quality. The consequences for families of not finding care may include job disruptions, greater financial strain, health challenges, and increased stress (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Providing access to high-quality inclusive programs is more important now than ever before, and the concerns are greater still for families of color. Disparities exist for children of color not only in accessing early intervention services but also in accessing developmental screenings. In a 2021 early intervention report from the Education Trust, Carrie Gillispie reports that Black and Latino children often have less access to programs in which specialists are trained to use screening tools, such as high-quality health care and early childhood education programs. This results in fewer screening opportunities.

In addition, children may have experienced trauma as a result of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. It caused stressors that may have lasting effects on children's social-emotional development and may contribute to ongoing behavior difficulties. One state has already documented higher rates of challenging behavior among preschoolers and increased need for infant-early childhood mental health consultation as a result of COVID-19 (Grindal et al., 2021). In order to address equity issues and build back better, the federal government, including ACF, remains committed to increasing access to services for children with disabilities (White House, 2021.)



As states, territories, and Tribes consider avenues to increase access to early childhood programs for families of children with disabilities, teaming and collaborating across early childhood education sectors to support families is critical. In the Office of Special Education Programs' *42nd Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, 619 coordinators who oversee preschool special education delivery in each state shared that they are engaged with early childhood services in varying ways. For instance, 54 percent of respondents reported involvement with Pyramid Model initiatives, 50 percent reported working on efforts to reduce suspension and expulsion, and 25 percent reported involvement in early childhood mental health consultation initiatives. Partnering with Part C and Part B providers is key in supporting families as they access early intervention services.



Additionally, states, territories, and Tribes can increase access to developmental screenings necessary to identify children with disabilities by connecting with Early Childhood Comprehensive System (ECCS) and the Health Resources and Services Administration's [Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting](#) (MIECHV) programs. ECCS programs are either housed in [Title V Maternal and Child Health](#) agencies or the agencies that partner with their state Maternal and Child Health Program. Title V has a national performance measure on developmental screening. MIECHV grantees must demonstrate measurable improvement regarding the following benchmark: "improved coordination and referral for other community resources and supports" (HRSA 2021). The [Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Health Integration Prenatal-to-Three \(ECCS\) Program Awards](#), awarded in July 2021, incorporate the promotion of early developmental health and family well-being of the prenatal-to-3 population in the purpose of the ECCS program. Just as past ECCS recipients prioritized developmental screenings, these awards will continue to make that a focus. This provides an opportunity for states, territories, and Tribes to coordinate support for children with disabilities in new ways.

In June 2021, the Office of Child Care released an information memorandum, [ARP Act CCDF Discretionary Supplemental Funds](#) (CCDF-ACF-IM-2021-03), with guidance for the American Rescue Plan (ARP) child care stabilization grant supplemental funds. It includes recommendations for increasing access for families and children with disabilities. These recommendations focus on the following: grants and contracts; expansion and support of family child care; increased programmatic accessibility and professional development; and accessible outreach to families.

## ARP Child Care Stabilization Grant Recommendations for Increasing Access

### Grants and Contracts

The Office of Child Care provides recommendations for grants and contracts in its information memorandum titled [ARP Act CCDF Discretionary Supplemental Funds](#) (CCDF-ACF-IM-2021-03.) Grants and contracts provide a more predictable funding stream directly to providers to purchase slots for specific types of care. Expanded use of grants or contracts for direct payments to child care providers helps build the supply of care for underserved populations, such as children with disabilities, dual language learners, and families who need care during nontraditional hours.

### State Examples

- ◆ **Alaska:** Alaska Inclusive Child Care Program (Alaska IN!) provides supplemental funding to qualifying child care providers caring for children with disabilities. The additional funding helps child care providers increase

the quality of inclusive care by paying for training, accommodations, and support needed to meet children’s individual needs. For more information, visit thread’s [“Special Services” web page](#).

- ◆ **Delaware:** Licensed child care providers can apply for child care capacity grants to serve children in underserved populations, such as children who need care during nontraditional hours, dual language learners, children with disabilities, and infants and toddlers. The eligibility requirements include a valid license, a contract with the Division of Social Services, good standing with all child care programs (such as the Child and Adult Care Food Program and the Delaware quality rating and improvement system), and evidence of capacity to serve children with disabilities. The project seeks to expand or enhance care that is safe, healthy, and appropriate, with an emphasis on serving low-income families in high-need areas. For more information, visit the Children & Families First [“Capacity Grant Program” web page](#).



### Related Resources

- ◆ *Sample Inter-Agency Data Sharing Memorandum of Understanding* (2019), National Center on Subsidy Innovation and Accountability, <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/sample-inter-agency-data-sharing-memorandum-understanding-mou>
- ◆ *Using Contracts and Grants to Build the Supply of High Quality Child Care: State Strategies and Practices* (2017), National Center on Subsidy Innovation and Accountability and the Child Care State Capacity Building Center,

<https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/using-contracts-and-grants-build-supply-high-quality-child-care-state-strategies-and>

- ◆ *Using Grants and Contracts, Payment Rates, and Financial Incentives to Increase Supply and Improve Quality* (2018), National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/webinar-using-grants-and-contracts-payment-rates-and-financial-incentives-increase-supply>

## Expansion and Support of Family Child Care

The Office of Child Care provides recommendations for expansion and support of family child care in its information memorandum titled [ARP Act CCDF Discretionary Supplemental Funds](#) (CCDF-ACF-IM-2021-03.) Another way states can use supplemental funds to support the expansion of care for underserved populations is to increase the number family child care providers providing care. States can also strengthen supports to those family child care providers already offering care. Underserved populations often find that family child care providers can be more responsive to the context, culture, and needs of the local community. This leads to more care for families who work nontraditional hours, those who live in rural communities, dual language learners, and children with disabilities.

Family child care providers can be connected to staffed family child care networks, which can help them enhance business practices, improve the quality of services, and connect them to critical resources in early intervention and health. For example, a [National Study of Family Child Care Networks report](#) found that of all the staffed family child care networks surveyed for the study, 84 percent provided training on inclusion and supporting children with disabilities (Bromer & Porter, 2019).



## State Example

- ◆ **California:** The Children’s Council of San Francisco’s Family Child Care Quality Network (FCCQN) is one of two family child care networks in San Francisco that offers support to the city’s quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) providers. One benefit of membership in this network is access to a team of experts who can help support children with disabilities. The team can provide resources, screenings, and best-practice techniques. For more information, visit the Children’s Council of San Francisco’s [“Children’s Council’s Child Care Business Incubator” web page](#).

## Related Resources

- ◆ *Developing a Staffed Family Child Care Network: A Technical Assistance Manual* (2017), National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/developing-staffed-family-child-care-network-technical-assistance-manual>
- ◆ *Home-Based Child Care Networks: Making Connections to Make a Difference* (n.d.), Home Grown, <https://homegrownchildcare.org/guide-sustainable-home-based-child-care/>
- ◆ *Staffed Family Child Care Network Cost Estimation Tool User’s Guide* (2017), National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/staffed-family-child-care-network-cost-estimation-tool/>
- ◆ *Staffed Family Child Care Networks: A Research-Informed Strategy for Supporting High-Quality Family Child Care* (2017), National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/staffed-family-child-care-networks-research-informed-strategy-supporting-high-quality>

## Increased Programmatic Accessibility and Professional Development

The Office of Child Care provides recommendations for increased accessibility and professional development in its information memorandum titled [ARP Act CCDF Discretionary Supplemental Funds](#) (CCDF-ACF-IM-2021-03). CCDF Lead Agencies are encouraged to consider the use of supplemental funds to help child care programs increase accessibility to services for children with disabilities. For example, providers can use funds to make minor renovations, such as installing railings and ramps, to improve accessibility. In addition, supplemental funds can be used to provide training on best practices for supporting children and families with disabilities to staff and family child care providers. One way in which states can identify program needs is to provide support from child care health consultants and inclusion coaches. States can also offer support to develop inclusion resources.

The term “medical home” has long been a way that the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has described the holistic approach to care needed by children with special needs. In 2002, the AAP published their first policy statement on medical home, expanding the definition to “medical care of infants, children, and adolescents that is accessible, continuous, comprehensive, family-centered, coordinated, compassionate, and culturally effective (AAP 2002).” The evolution of medical home recognizes the need for support for children with disabilities in the context of the child’s family and community. This community includes early childhood providers who can partner with a child’s medical home for professional development as well as guidance on how best to care for a child with disabilities.



## State Examples

- ◆ **Colorado:** The Preschool Development Grant (PDG) Inclusion and Universal Design Program is a Colorado program to increase inclusion and diversity accessibility in home- and center-based child care. The goals of this program are to expand Colorado’s child care provider capacity and ensure children with a wide variety of delays and disabilities are included in these settings. The first phase of this project will be implemented by the Center for Inclusive Design and Engineering through the University of Colorado Denver. In this phase, 25 applicants will be offered training, technical assistance, and kits containing equipment and resources. This will help these applicants support the development of inclusive learning environments. For more information, visit the Colorado Office of Early Childhood’s “Preschool Development Grant Inclusion and Universal Design Program” under “Funding Opportunities for Child Care Programs and Profession.”  
[https://www.coloradoofficeofearlychildhood.com/OEC\\_Resources?p=Resources&s=Division-of-Early-Care-and-Learning&lang=en](https://www.coloradoofficeofearlychildhood.com/OEC_Resources?p=Resources&s=Division-of-Early-Care-and-Learning&lang=en)
- ◆ **Delaware:** The [\*Delaware Early Childhood Inclusion Guide\*](#) (n.d.) was developed by the Delaware Department of Education in collaboration with the member agencies of the Early Childhood Inclusion Committee. This guide is organized into five sections that address policy, strategies for working with families, accommodations, modifications and supports, Child Find, and resources. For more information, visit the Delaware Department of Education’s [“Families & Communities \(3-8 Years of Age\): Early Childhood Special Education Inclusion” web page](#).
- ◆ **Minnesota:** The Center for Inclusive Child Care (CICC) provides free relationship-based professional development. This includes support, modeling, and resources to child care programs throughout the state. Coaches spend time in programs, providing support focused on the successful inclusion of children with challenging behaviors or disabilities. Coaches also share information about implementing health and safety best practices and supporting the unique needs of infants and toddlers. For more information, visit [CICC’s “Coaching” web page](#).
- ◆ **South Carolina:** The South Carolina Child Care Inclusion Collaborative (SCIC) provides individualized training and technical assistance to child care providers. This training and technical assistance helps providers support the inclusion of children with disabilities or developmental delays in child care programs. Inclusion specialists work directly with child care staff and program administrators to increase the use of evidence-based practices that lead to all children’s meaningful participation. Through active collaboration with other agencies and organizations, SCIC helps child care providers stay connected with resources and opportunities, helping to increase the quality of care and education provided to children and families in South Carolina. For more information, [SCIC’s website](#).



## Related Resources

- ◆ *Children with Special Needs and Inclusion Practices in QRIS 2019 Fact Sheet* (2020), National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/children-special-needs-and-inclusion-practices-qr-2019-fact-sheet>
- ◆ “Creating Inclusive Environments and Learning Experiences for Infants and Toddlers” (n.d.) in the *Infant/Toddler Resource Guide*, Child Care State Capacity Building Center, <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/infant-toddler-resource-guide/creating-inclusive-environments-and-learning-experiences-infants-and>
- ◆ *Early Care and Education Environment Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion* (2021), Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center and the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations, [https://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/topics/inclusion/ece\\_indicators\\_of\\_high\\_quality\\_inclusion.pdf](https://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/topics/inclusion/ece_indicators_of_high_quality_inclusion.pdf)

- ◆ *Inclusion of Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities or Other Special Needs* (2018), Child Care State Capacity Building Center, <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/infant-toddler-resource-guide/inclusion-infants-and-toddlers-disabilities-or-other-special-needs>
- ◆ *Programs Serving Children with Disabilities—IDEA as a Key Component of State Early Childhood Systems* (2021), National Technical Assistance Center for Preschool Development Grants Birth Through Five (PDG B-5) in partnership with the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/programs-serving-children-disabilities-idea-key-component-state-early-childhood-systems>
- ◆ *Programs Serving Children with Disabilities—IDEA as a Key Component of a State Early Childhood System* (2021), Grace Kelley, Rachel Brady, Sally Shepherd, and Ryan Grimm, SRI International, <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/programs-serving-children-disabilities-idea-key-component-state-early-childhood-system>



## Accessible Outreach to Families

The Office of Child Care provides recommendations for outreach to families in its information memorandum titled [ARP Act CCDF Discretionary Supplemental Funds](#) (CCDF-ACF-IM-2021-03). Supplement funds provide an opportunity for ensuring outreach efforts to families are widely available in plain language and appropriate for persons with disabilities. This will help increase access for families and providers who are not currently receiving child care subsidies as well as for children from underserved

communities. Resources on using plain language are available from Plain Language Action and Information Network at <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/>.

## State Example

- ◆ **Illinois:** [Early CHOICES](#) is an inclusion initiative of the Illinois State Board of Education. It promotes increasing high-quality inclusive early care and education for all children birth to age 5. The goal is to increase the number of children with disabilities receiving specialized services in regular early care and education settings. The website includes the Understanding Inclusion series, which contains six topics that explore key ideas about inclusion in early childhood. The series covers defining inclusion, understanding the benefits of inclusion, and advocating for inclusion. The initiative was developed for families with family input, but it is just as meaningful and useful for practitioners working with families who have children from birth to 5.



## Related Resources

- ◆ *Designing Websites That Are Accessible for All Families* (2019), Child Care State Capacity Building Center, [https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/designing\\_consumer\\_websites\\_accessible\\_for\\_all\\_families\\_0.pdf](https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/designing_consumer_websites_accessible_for_all_families_0.pdf)
- ◆ “Outreach to Families with Limited English Proficiency and Disabilities” (2019) within the *Fundamentals of Child Care Development Fund Administration*, State Capacity Building Center, <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/ccdf-fundamentals/outreach-families-limited-english-proficiency-and-disabilities>

- ◆ “Services for Children with Disabilities” (n.d.) web page available on Childcare.gov, <https://www.childcare.gov/consumer-education/services-for-children-with-disabilities>

As we celebrate the 31st anniversary of the signing of the American Disabilities Act, states, territories, and Tribes are reminded that they have an unprecedented opportunity to make investments that will increase accessibility for children with disabilities and their families. Moreover, partnering with early intervention coordinators, home visiting programs, and Title V programs, such as ECCS, will expand access and reduce disparities in accessing developmental screenings and early intervention services. A coordinated effort will support children with disabilities as well as the caregivers and families of these children.

## ARP Guidance Resources

The following resources were accessed in August 2021:

- ◆ *Advancing Equity through the American Rescue Plan Act* (2021), the Children’s Equity Project, <https://childandfamilysuccess.asu.edu/cep/initiatives/advancing-equity-through-american-rescue-plan-act>
- ◆ *American Rescue Plan Act CCDF Discretionary Supplemental Funds* (CCDF-ACF-IM-2021-03) (2021), Office of Child Care, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/policy-guidance/ccdf-acf-im-2021-03>
- ◆ “IDEA American Rescue Plan Funds” web page (2021), U.S. Department of Education, <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/leg/arp/index.html>
- ◆ *Recommendations for Stakeholders: Offering Advice on the Use of IDEA ARP Funds* (2021), Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, <https://www.dec-sped.org/single-post/recommendations-for-stakeholders-offering-advice-on-the-use-of-idea-arp-funds-may-2021>

## Additional Resources

- ◆ Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) web site, U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, <https://www.ada.gov/>
- ◆ Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! web site, [Office of the Administration for Children & Families’ Office of Early Learning](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ecd/child-health-development/watch-me-thrive), <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ecd/child-health-development/watch-me-thrive>
- ◆ *Considerations for Building Post-COVID Early Care and Education Systems that Serve Children with Disabilities* (2020), Mallory Warner-Richter and Chrishana M. Lloyd, Child Trends, <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/ncase-resource-library/considerations-building-post-covid-early-care-and-education-systems-serve>
- ◆ Engaging Families and Creating Trusting Partnerships to Improve Child and Family Outcomes, (June 2017). Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, <https://ectacenter.org/~calls/2017/familyengagement.asp>
- ◆ Highly Individualized Practices Series, (2021), Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/children-disabilities/article/highly-individualized-practices-series>
- ◆ *[IDEA] Part C Coordinators* (2021, August 13), Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, <https://ectacenter.org/contact/ptccoord.asp>
- ◆ *[IDEA Part B] Section 619 Coordinators* (2021, August 13), Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, <https://ectacenter.org/contact/619coord.asp>
- ◆ *Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion*, (2015). Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, <https://ectacenter.org/topics/inclusion/indicators.asp>

- ◆ Learn the Signs. Act Early web site, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/index.html>
- ◆ National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center web site, <https://ectacenter.org/>
- ◆ National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders web site, [National Institute of Health, https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/](https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/)
- ◆ *Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs* (ODAS, ECD-ACF-PS-2017-03) (2015/2017), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education, [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/e cd/policy\\_statement\\_on\\_inclusion\\_of\\_children\\_with\\_disabilities\\_in\\_early.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/e cd/policy_statement_on_inclusion_of_children_with_disabilities_in_early.pdf)
- ◆ Responding with Families to Developmental Concerns, (2018), Early Childhood Knowledge and Learning Center, <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/children-disabilities/article/responding-families-developmental-concerns>
- ◆ *Serving the Whole Person: An Alignment and Coherence Guide for Local Education Agencies* (2021), Natalie Walrond, WestEd, <https://www.wested.org/resources/whole-person-alignment-and-coherence-guide-for-local-education-agencies/#>
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- ◆ The Early Childhood Personnel Center web site, University of Connecticut, Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, <https://ecpcta.org/>.

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