



Inclusion of Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities or Other Special Needs

In group care settings, what does inclusion of infants and toddlers with disabilities or other special needs involve? And how can teachers find out what they need to know? To begin with, **inclusion** involves a process of developing an understanding of inclusive child care settings and acting with intention to create them. In infant and toddler care, inclusion requires an attitude of acceptance and compassion, and a commitment to create an atmosphere of authentic belonging for children and their families.

Every one of us understands the desire to feel included and to belong. This is the essence of inclusive child care—that every infant, toddler, and child feels like an important and contributing member of the group.

Whether teachers are new to this field or have years of experience, their personal and professional backgrounds will be valuable in considering high-quality inclusive child care in the specific context of the children and families with whom they work. The process of creating an inclusive environment includes the opportunity to reflect on personal biases or assumptions about children with special needs and on what it takes to be truly inclusive.

To create an environment that supports a sense of belonging, infant and toddler teachers need to know what is required by law, how to create inclusive environments and learning experiences, and strategies to collaborate with families and other professionals. A technical assistance (TA) or professional development (PD) provider can help child care professionals build knowledge and skills in these areas with practical guidance to enhance their confidence and competence in providing high-quality inclusive child care.

What Is Required by Law?

The Program for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities (Part C) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was created “to enhance the development of infants and toddlers with disabilities, minimize potential developmental delay, and reduce educational costs to our society by minimizing the need for special education services as children with disabilities reach school age” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, p. 1).

To learn about how different states and territories provide services under Part C, visit the [Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center](#) (ECTA) website, which links to the Part C early intervention system in each state and territory. This site also includes state resources on Part C service delivery approaches. Some states have developed specific guidance, policies, or statements about inclusive practices.

Each state and territory has a unique system for providing services under Part C and has one agency that oversees the early intervention system for infants and toddlers (birth to 3) with disabilities or developmental delays. Some states and territories also serve infants and toddlers who are at a higher risk for developmental delay for biological or medical reasons or because of their environmental or caregiving circumstances. Part C provides early intervention services to infants and toddlers with developmental delays or medical conditions likely to lead to a developmental delay. Part C is not intended to be a stand-alone program. Its intent is to build interagency partnerships among state and territory agencies and programs in health, education, human services, and developmental disabilities.



Part C of IDEA specifies that early intervention services and supports must be provided in **natural environments**, which means settings that are typical for same-aged infants and toddlers without disabilities. These environments may include the child's home or a community setting. The term **inclusion** as defined in this chapter is aligned with the basic ideas and values reflected in the term "natural environments" (Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009).

Part C of IDEA guides the services and care provided for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families in child care settings. Helping teachers develop an understanding of natural environments and inclusion gives them insight and direction when creating high-quality inclusive child care environments.

A Resource for Frequently Asked Questions

- What is developmental screening?
- Why is it important?
- What is the difference between screening and assessment?
- I'm worried about a child; how can I find more information to find out if he or she is on track?

Have you wondered about questions such as these, or do you have other questions about child development and serving children with disabilities?

Find answers to your questions, links to key resources, and more in the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center's frequently asked questions about serving children with special needs. The answers apply to all children, not just those enrolled in Head Start or Early Head Start.

[Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center. \(2017\). Frequently asked questions: Disabilities.](#)

Including infants and toddlers with disabilities in child care settings means taking a stand for care in which everyone who is involved with each infant, toddler, and family is recognized as important—the infant or toddler, the family members, the provider in the family child care home or child care center, other program staff and leaders, early interventionists working with the family, and other community partners.

Questions for TA and PD Providers to Ask Infant/Toddler Care Teachers

Early childhood professionals best meet the individual learning needs of children in their care by working in partnership with family members, identifying children's strengths and interests, and designing learning environments and adapting materials and activities for infants and toddlers with a variety of special needs and disabilities. This requires careful planning, ongoing communication, and time dedicated to this important work.

TA and PD providers can play an important role in facilitating reflection with caregivers and program leaders (including family childcare owners and operators) about how they can help each infant, toddler, and family feel safe, included, and valued in their programs. Setting aside time for questions such as those listed below, can help teachers reflect on how to include infants and toddlers with disabilities and special needs and their families in an authentic way in their child care program.

- ◆ In what ways are you an important part of this process?
- ◆ In what ways do you help the child, family, and other professionals know they are an important part of this process?
- ◆ How do you find support when you have needs or questions about caring for an infant or toddler with special needs?



Inclusive Practices: Questions to Inspire Thinking and Action

Below are several questions a TA or PD provider might use with caregivers or program leaders to inspire deeper thinking and action about improving their inclusive practices.

- ◆ What are your experiences caring for infants and toddlers with suspected disabilities or other special needs? Are there experiences and insights you can share with your colleagues about successes and possible concerns?
- ◆ How do you create environments that are welcoming to *all* children and their families?
- ◆ In what ways do you treat children with disabilities and their families with compassion and respect?
- ◆ How do you provide services for infants and toddlers with disabilities in settings where young children would naturally be if they did not have disabilities? (Examples include home; playground, library, and other community-based settings; center-based or family child care; Early Head Start; parent-child classes, and so on.)
- ◆ How do you promote access, participation, and belonging in daily learning experiences? How do you incorporate elements of Universal Design for Learning? (See *Creating Inclusive Environments and Learning Experiences for Infants and Toddlers*, the next article in this chapter.)
- ◆ How do you focus on learning about each infant and toddler as an individual, including his or her strengths and interests?
- ◆ How are individual children's strengths and interests reflected in daily routines, materials for exploration, and learning experiences?
- ◆ Are there insights, questions, or concerns you have about caring for infants and toddlers with disabilities?
- ◆ How are inclusive practices outlined in your program philosophy, policies, and practices?
- ◆ How do you communicate with families about children's individual development, including strengths and challenges, interests, and progress?
- ◆ How do you work in partnership with early interventionists and families?
- ◆ How do program leaders (including family child care owners and operators) address their responsibility to build caregivers' confidence and competence through ongoing professional development opportunities?

Resources

[California MAP to Inclusion and Belonging: Making Access Possible](#) (WestEd): Visit this site for essential information and publications on inclusion, including the book, *Inclusion Works*, and training PowerPoints created by.

[Center for Inclusive Child Care](#) (CICC): Explore this network for comprehensive resources for training and consultation to support inclusive care for children in community settings.

[Children with Disabilities](#) (Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center): Explore this web page for information on inclusion and individualized teaching and learning, frequently asked questions, and resources about specific disabilities.

[CONNECT: Foundations of Inclusion Birth to Five](#) (CONNECT, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill): This popular video provides an overview of research, policy, and outcomes of inclusive child care.



[CONNECT Modules](#) (CONNECT, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill): Participate in these self-guided online courses to improve your inclusive practices.

[Desired Results Access Project Video Library](#) (Napa County Office of Education, Research and Professional Development Center): Watch these videos to enhance your skills in observation, documentation, assessment, evaluation, coaching, consultation, reflective practice, family education, and professional development.

[Early Childhood Technical Assistance \(ECTA\) Center](#): This site is funded by the [Office of Special Education Programs](#) to improve state early intervention and early childhood special education service systems, increase the implementation of effective practices, and enhance the outcomes of these programs for young children and their families.

[Early Intervention and School Readiness for Infants and Toddlers with Special Needs](#) (Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center): Watch this 55-minute video for ways to adapt environments and practices to support school readiness for infants and toddler with special needs.

[Inclusion Matters](#) (Center for Inclusive Child Care): Listen to these podcasts to hear inclusion specialists discuss diverse topics. Continuing education units (CEUs) are available.

[Infant and Toddler Development, Screening, and Assessment](#) (Office of Child Care and Zero to Three): Explore this training module for child care consultants about screening and assessment of infants and toddlers.

[Learn the Signs: Act Early](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention): Look here for materials on developmental milestones and resources on early warning signs.

[National Professional Development Center on Inclusion \(NPDCI\)](#) (Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill): Access this site to support your efforts to develop statewide professional development systems that support early childhood inclusion.

[Parent Center Hub](#) (Center for Parent Information and Resources): Review this site to help you support centers that serve families of children with disabilities.

[Project TaCTICS](#) (Florida State University Department of Communication Disorders): Get information and training modules to help build collaborations with early intervention service providers who are serving infants, toddlers, and their families.

[Providing Early Intervention Services in Natural Environments](#) (Center for Parent Information and Resources): Find resources about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the definition of natural environments, key roles in early intervention, and the development of Individualized Family Service Plans.

[Quality Inclusive Practices](#) (National Professional Development Center on Inclusion, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill): Review these resources to enhance your understanding of inclusive practices to support access, participation, and systems collaboration.

[Special Needs and Inclusion](#) (California Department of Education and WestEd): Watch this video from the California Early Childhood Educator Competency series to explore program policies for inclusion, developmentally appropriate practices, collaboration with families and service providers, and adapting environments and equipment for infants, toddlers, and young children with disabilities or other special needs.

[SpecialQuest Multimedia Training Library](#) (Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and the Office of Head Start): Access this training library to support your work with caregivers related to inclusion of infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families.

[Watch Me! Celebrating Milestones and Sharing Concerns](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention): Participate in this 1-hour, 4-module online training course to learn about tools and best practices for monitoring the development of children in your care. CEUs available.



[Zero to Three](#): Explore the Zero to Three website to find information and resources on early development, early learning, parenting, and policy and advocacy supporting the unique needs of infants and toddlers.

References

Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, & National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2009). *Early childhood inclusion* [Position statement]. Retrieved from https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/DEC_NAEYC_EC_updatedKS.pdf

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, 20 U.S.C. § 1400. (2004). Retrieved from <http://idea.ed.gov/part-c/downloads/IDEA-Statute.pdf>

The State Capacity Building Center (SCBC) works with state and territory leaders and their partners to create innovative early childhood systems and programs that improve results for children and families. The SCBC is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care.

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