



Creating Inclusive Environments and Learning Experiences for Infants and Toddlers

A sense of authentic belonging is essential to inclusion. Just sharing physical space is not enough; when caregivers work to create meaningful relationships and experiences to fully include infants and toddlers with identified or suspected disabilities or other special needs, everyone benefits. Creating a truly inclusive environment means fostering inclusivity in the social-emotional environment—a sense of belonging—as well as making appropriate adaptations to the physical environment and materials.

What Does Inclusion Look Like in Real Life and How Can Technical Assistance and Professional Development Providers Support It?

When an individual child needs some help to explore the environment, caregivers can make modifications to support the child's participation in the classroom. Removing unstable objects when an infant is pulling up and learning to stand, or sitting quietly every morning with a toddler who has a particularly hard time with saying goodbye to a parent, are examples of changes caregivers probably make on a regular basis in their programs to accommodate children's needs. Individual adaptations for a child's disability or other special need are not that different.

A technical assistance (TA) or professional development (PD) provider can help teachers identify ways to individualize care for children with identified or suspected disabilities or special needs. This might include supporting teachers in talking with parents, connecting with an early intervention specialist when there is one available, or consulting other colleagues to consider what adaptations are best for the child.

High-quality infant and toddler environments will naturally support the exploration and development of children with a range of energy levels, skills, and interests. Beginning with a foundation that incorporates elements of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) ensures that learning environments promote access, participation, and support for *all* infants and toddlers.

A Video Example: Inclusion and Natural Environment

In this video clip, a toddler eats lunch with his peers and [food therapist](#).

Here is the link to the video clip:

<https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/infant-toddler-resource-guide/supporting-videos>

Reflective questions: Here are some questions related to the video clip and the value of intervention services in the natural environment.

- In what ways does the food therapist encourage Trevor to experience the foods?
- How did Trevor and the other children respond to and potentially benefit from this experience?
- Can you think of other examples of intervention in the natural environment, such as a toddler receiving a breathing treatment, or an infant having a heart monitor while sleeping? (Note: In some cases, the child care provider learns how to provide the intervention services and in others, professional interventionists come to the program, as in the video.)
- Does this video remind you of experiences you've had with children in your care or in your program? If so, what are these experiences and how are they similar?

Please note that all programs filmed in this project are in full compliance with licensing regulations at the time of filming. In each video, the required adult-to-child ratio is met and all children are supervised, even if other adults are not visible on the screen.



UDL is a framework for intentionally creating environments accessible to children with a variety of abilities and ways of exploring and learning. The idea of universal design was originally applied to the field of architecture to ensure that buildings and public spaces were accessible to people with a variety of abilities. Some examples of universal design include automatic doors, auditory cues in elevators (announcing the floor number) and at crosswalks (announcing that it is safe to cross the street), curb cuts at intersections,

Wheelchair ramps, and handrails. Although the original intention was to ensure access for people with disabilities, many other people find these accessibility features useful in their daily lives (Conn-Powers, Cross, Traub, & Hutter-Pishgahi, 2006). TA and PD providers can encourage caregivers to think about whether there are ways these universal designs have been useful to them.

In the field of early care and education, the concept of universal design for learning includes curriculum design (teaching strategies and learning outcomes), relationships, physical arrangement of the environment, and learning materials (Cunconan-Lahr & Stifel, 2013). Applying UDL principles in these ways ensures that each child has equal opportunities to meaningfully engage in all aspects of the child care setting. As a result, *all* children can experience inclusion and belonging. Inclusive care benefits typically developing children and their families as well. A TA or PD provider can encourage teachers to reflect on the ways in which this is true in their programs.

A child with a disability is a child first; the child's disability, diagnosis, or label is secondary, and does not define who the child is or what his or her potential may be.

A TA or PD provider can talk with teachers about how this concept applies, including using language that puts the child first, such as "a child with special needs" rather than "a special-needs child."

Choosing toys and materials carefully is another important part of creating inclusive learning environments. Toys and materials should encourage engagement and create opportunities for all children to experience success and developmentally appropriate challenges. For infants and toddlers, child care providers typically offer a variety of toys, such as blocks, stacking or nesting cups, and simple shape sorters or puzzles designed for very young children to use. Also, including materials that promote sensory exploration by using smells, sounds, sights, and textures enhances children's learning and development.

Depending on the individual needs and abilities of a child, some toys or materials might require simple adaptations and modifications to support the child's ability to participate in the activity. For example, attaching Velcro hook-and-loop fasteners, large knobs, or handles can make it easier for a child to play with blocks or puzzles. Similarly, adding fabric or tabs to the edges of cardboard book pages can make it easier to turn pages. Electronic toys, switches, and other devices, may allow children who have limited hand function, or lack of muscle control, to use toys or materials that they could not play with otherwise. In addition, sometimes a very young child will need

equipment for positioning, such as a specialized chair or stander.

These are just a few simple and inexpensive strategies to ensure that *all* children can use materials successfully. Fortunately, family members and specialists who are familiar with an individual child's development are also a great source of information and ideas for making simple adaptations and modifications to support the child's success. Many toys and materials for infants and toddlers already include some of the simple adaptations mentioned above. TA or PD providers can talk with child care providers about making adaptations to materials to meet the needs of infants and toddlers in their care. Remember to encourage teachers to be mindful of potential choking hazards when considering modifying materials.

TA and PD providers can help child care providers look at their child care settings with attention to how children with disabilities or special needs will explore and use the environment. This gives providers an opportunity to consider the strengths of their environments and enhance them as needed.



Resources

To support inclusion, infant and toddler teachers need to think about two basic questions: “How is my program doing?” and “How can we improve?” To help answer these questions, teachers may want to complete a self-assessment of inclusive practices in their program using a checklist such as one listed below. TA or PD providers can help teachers understand the checklist or complete it with them. Teachers may also benefit from learning about everyday approaches to assistive technology, including strategies for selecting and adapting toys. Examples of adaptations, may help teachers think of their own creative ideas to adapt materials for children in their care.

Self-Assessment Checklists:

- ◆ [Checklists for Providing and Receiving Early Intervention Supports in Child Care Settings](#) (Family, Infant and Preschool Program Center for the Advanced Study of Excellence in Early Childhood and Family Support Practices, J. Iverson Riddle Developmental Center): Use these checklists to assess your practices to promote learning and development.
- ◆ [Inclusive Planning Checklist: Center-Based Early Care and Education Programs](#) (SpecialQuest Birth–Five: Head Start/Hilton Foundation Training Program): Review this checklist for suggested ways to create responsive and effective inclusive environments in center-based early learning settings.
- ◆ [Inclusive Planning Checklist: Home-Visiting Programs](#) (SpecialQuest Birth–Five: Head Start/Hilton Foundation Training Program): Access this tool to aid you in providing home-based services to infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families.

Adapting the Environment and Materials:

- ◆ [Adapting the Child Care Environment for Children with Special Needs](#) (eXtension Alliance for Better Child Care): Explore this resource on environmental adaptations for including children with special needs.
- ◆ [Assistive Technology for Infants, Toddlers, and Young Children with Disabilities](#) (Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers): Learn the benefits of assistive technology to support social, motor, and communication skills, as well as attention span, self-confidence, and independence of infants and toddlers.
- ◆ [Steps for Adapting Materials for Use by All Children](#): This chart by Kirsten Haugen shows modes for adapting toys based on materials from the “Let’s Play” Project at the University of Buffalo.

References

- Conn-Powers, M., Cross, A., Traub, E., & Hutter-Pishgahi, L. (2006, September). *The universal design of early education: Moving forward for all children*. Beyond the Journal: *Young Children* on the Web, National Association for the Education of Young Children. Retrieved from https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/styles/iidc/defiles/ECC/ECC_Universal_Design_Early_Education.pdf
- Cunconan-Lahr, R. L., & Stifel, S. (2013). *Universal Design for Learning (UDL) checklist for early childhood environments*. Bethlehem, PA: Building Inclusive Child Care (BICC) Project, Northampton Community College, Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Council. Retrieved from http://northampton.edu/Documents/ECE/Checklist_and_Questions.pdf



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