

Including Children with Special Needs

Are You and Your Early Childhood Program Ready?

Amy Watson and Rebecca McCathren



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Increasing numbers of young children with special needs are being cared for in early childhood settings in their community. Although early childhood professionals approach inclusion with open minds and hearts, many may still be anxious about their ability to respond fully to the needs of children with disabilities.

You may wonder how well your preschool or kindergarten is prepared to include a child with special needs. Welcoming a young child with special needs into your classroom can raise many concerns or relatively few, depending on the child's abilities. Individualized accommodations might be necessary as you consider the supports each child needs for learning and how to respond to a family's wishes and concerns. Some basic principles exist and can help you think about your program's overall inclusion readiness.

Community and commitment

Coming together as a community to create a truly inclusive system of early childhood care and education requires commitment and a willingness to strive to be ready to teach and support every child in the community.

Inclusive environments are designed to provide an educational setting in which all children can be as involved and independent as possible (Winter 1999). Many times there are unidentified or unknown barriers to full participation that cause children with special needs to become isolated, frustrated, and less independent than their peers. This article provides information preschool and kindergarten educators can use to identify possible barriers and overcome them so all children can participate and learn.

Confidence and a checklist

To help administrators and teachers build confidence in their abilities to be inclusive and increase their awareness of the needs of children with disabilities, we developed a

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“Preschool and Kindergarten Inclusion Readiness Checklist” (see p. 3).

Ideally, programs will implement this tool through staff discussions about the curriculum, physical space, daily schedule, and approach to discipline, coupled with a walking tour of the building and outdoor areas. Identifying potential barriers to inclusion allows educators to adjust the physical environment, programming, and teaching methods as needed and to seek related supports before a child with special needs joins the program. This ensures the child’s success from day one.

To review whether your learning environment is accessible to children with a variety of special needs, the “Preschool and Kindergarten Inclusion Readiness Checklist” provides a set of questions for teachers and administrators to ask themselves (see also Doctoroff 2001). The more “yes” answers, the more ready is the classroom or program. This checklist is similar to and based on *universal design* (Conn-Powers et al. 2006), a concept originated in the field of architecture for creating spaces, such as homes or shopping centers, that are accessible to everyone, regardless of ability.

Accessibility in early childhood programs means that all children can interact with materials, activities, teachers, and peers to the fullest extent possible and with equal frequency and enjoyment. When applied in early childhood settings, universal design concepts refer to the program’s physical features as well as to such features as daily schedule and classroom routines, curriculum, and teaching strategies (Conn-Powers et al. 2006; Klein, Cook, & Richardson Gibbs 2000).

Online Links to Recommended Resource Web Sites

Assistive technology

Able Net: www.ablenetinc.com

The Adaptive Child: www.adaptivechild.com

DragonFly: www.dragonflytoys.com

Child care and the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act)

www.ada.gov/childq&a.htm

www.acgov.org/childcare/documents/top8questions.pdf

Disability-related information

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities:

www.nichcy.org/Pages/Home.aspx

National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (NECTAC):

www.nectac.org/default.asp

Inclusion and teaching strategies

Center on the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning:

www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/wwwb.html

Circle of Inclusion: www.circleofinclusion.org (Also available: Preschool Inclusion Manual. PDF at www.circleofinclusion.org/english/pim/manual.pdf)

Council for Exceptional Children, Division for Early Childhood:

www.dec-sped.org

Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina:

www.fpg.unc.edu (Also available: An Administrator’s Guide to Preschool Inclusion at www.fpg.unc.edu/~publicationoffice/pdfs/AdmGuide.pdf)

New Horizons for Learning: www.newhorizons.org

Play resources

AblePlay: www.ableplay.org

Guide to Toys for Children with Special Needs 2008:

www.afb.org/Section.asp?SectionID=82

Toys for Kids with Disabilities: www.disabilityresources.org/TOYS.html

Toys and Playtime Time Tips for Children with Special Needs:

www.fisher-price.com/us/special_needs

Inclusive environments are designed to provide an educational setting in which all children can be as involved and independent as possible.

Preschool and Kindergarten Inclusion Readiness Checklist

For All Children

Home-school communication

Does the program have a system for frequent, ongoing, two-way communications with families (weekly, preferably daily)?

Teachers and parents use a communication tool like daily written notes that can be saved and referred to or shared with other family members or a professional. A teacher-family journal that can be passed back and forth is a helpful tool for ongoing two-way communications.

Yes	Not yet
☐	☐

Are parent/teacher conferences held several times each year?

Use conferences to exchange information about the child's experiences and progress and to invite parents to share their concerns and suggestions.

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Can the program be flexible in responding to parent preferences in feeding, scheduling, and other care routines?

Ask for feedback from families on how teachers can be more responsive to parent preferences. You might try an anonymous survey to get initial information about the group's preferences. Reach out to particular families when teachers have a specific concern or need more information.

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Supporting positive behavior

Do teachers explain to children and reinforce behavioral expectations?

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Do teachers model appropriate behavior?

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Do teachers, with support from supervisors, create environments and develop plans to prevent problem behaviors?

Observations by supervisors and specialists are a helpful way to prevent and address behaviors that challenge children and adults.

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Do teachers remind children what to do before transitions or at times of the day that typically can be chaotic?

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Do teachers notice and comment on positive behavior?

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Do teachers look for the reasons for a child's behavior and teach the child appropriate ways to express their needs and feelings?

For example, if Nora, a nonverbal child, hits Omar to get his attention, the teacher shows Nora how to touch gently to let Omar know that she wants to play with him.

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Assessment and curriculum

Do teachers use developmental observations to collect information, and do they use the information to plan the curriculum?

Consider using a curriculum that links child assessment to classroom planning.

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Do classroom materials (books, posters, dolls/figures) show positive and diverse images of children and adults with disabilities engaged in typical life situations and community roles?

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Do classrooms have an up-to-date computer station with appropriate programs?

Many children with special needs benefit from the use of computerized learning technology. Seek expert advice when choosing hardware and software that support children with specific learning challenges.

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Preschool and Kindergarten Inclusion Readiness Checklist

Supporting social skills

Does the program use a social skills curriculum that emphasizes kindness, empathy, and play skills?

All children benefit from frequent teaching of these concepts through modeling, prompting, puppetry, and storytelling.

Yes Not yet

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Do teachers plan for and support peer interaction?

Teachers can offer individualized support so that all children learn how to play and learn together in class and beyond.

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Do classrooms have multiples of high-interest toys, such as telephones and firefighter helmets, to minimize disagreements and encourage dramatic play?

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Do teachers and other adults serve as positive models of social behavior?

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For Children with Physical Disabilities

Could a child who uses mobility equipment, such as a wheelchair or walker, enter the building?

As children become older, all should be able to enter the building independently. If the program needs to install a ramp, it does not have to be connected to the primary entrance but must meet certain safety and logistical requirements. Child care program providers may be eligible for state-funded grants to make these accommodations. To seek advice from local ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) consultants, go to www.adata.org.

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Are all areas of the classroom accessible to all children?

For example, if the room has a play loft or stage, can all of the children reach it?

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Are there railings on all stairways?

Children will find it easier to navigate steps if there is a railing to hold on to. Railings should be at a level that a child can reach and hold comfortably.

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Are there hand railings next to toilets?

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Are there step stools in front of sinks?

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Do step stools and climbing toys have nonslip bottoms?

All items that children might climb on should have sticky bottoms that prevent sliding.

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Are all areas in classrooms, hallways, and outdoors large enough so a child who uses mobility equipment can turn around?

Most mobility equipment requires a four- to five-foot turning radius. Could furniture and/or equipment be moved to provide sufficient space?

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Are flooring surfaces smooth, with few changes in surface levels?

A child who is unstable or who has a visual impairment might trip if there are abrupt changes in the levels of the floor (for example, from a tiled area to a rug.) Carpets with low pile are best.

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If the floor is uncarpeted, is your subfloor resilient?

Resilient floors, such as wood or linoleum, have some spring when children or adults jump on them, and the resilient material can help absorb some of the shock from falls.

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Do classrooms have permanent and movable pieces of furniture?

Permanent pieces of furniture give children a steady place to lean on or to use for pulling themselves up to a standing position.

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Are tables and chairs stable?

Tables and chairs should not slide if a child needs to lean on them. To test stability, wiggle the furniture. If it moves or wobbles, then it is not stable.

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Do classrooms include a variety of seating options?

Minimally, options should include soft cushions, low and high chairs, chairs with stable sides, and seating for adults and children to share comfortably for extended one-on-one interactions at eye level. Additionally, small and large bolsters and pillows may be arranged to give children more stability and motor control and to ensure their comfort levels as they grow.

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Preschool and Kindergarten Inclusion Readiness Checklist

For Children with Hearing and/or Vision Impairments

	Yes	Not yet
Is lighting evenly distributed throughout the classrooms? If the lighting casts bright or harsh glares or leaves some areas too dim, use mirrors to redistribute the light. Add lamps that provide softer light or window shades. Reposition furniture and shiny surfaces to eliminate the glare.	☐	☐
Does the room ever seem too noisy or is it difficult to hear what children and adults are saying, even when sitting side by side? If the noise levels in the room are too loud, install sound-absorbing tiles or panels or cover more surfaces with draperies and carpets. Use room dividers to separate quiet areas from noisier areas of the classroom.	☐	☐
Can adults with and without corrected vision read labels from across the room? Make labels using large block letters and consistent forms of print, with dark letters on light backgrounds (preferably black on white).	☐	☐
Are classroom areas clutter free, with clear pathways between them, even when children are playing with materials on the floor? When toys and materials are clearly organized, all children can learn where they are displayed and stored and reach them on their own. Children can learn to keep items in bins and off the floor and return chairs to their original places at cleanup time.	☐	☐
Does the learning environment address all sensory modalities—visual, auditory, kinesthetic? Provide interesting tactile, music, and movement toys and activities in the daily curriculum.	☐	☐

For Children with Communication and Language Disorders

Is information presented in multiple formats? Use pictures, picture schedules, symbols, and words to communicate with children.	☐	☐
Do teachers supplement spoken words with eye contact and gestures?	☐	☐
Do teachers modify their language to reflect the developmental levels of the children they are speaking to? For example, use shorter sentences when talking with 3-year-olds and longer ones when conversing with 5-year-olds.	☐	☐
Do teachers frequently check to make sure children understand what was said? Look for signs such as eye contact, gestures, and behaviors that indicate understanding. Ask children to repeat back and explain what was said to them.	☐	☐
Do teachers encourage children to “use their words,” then model appropriate language?	☐	☐
Does the classroom library include a variety and range of books suitable for different ages and developmental levels?	☐	☐
Do teachers read books with children one-on-one in addition to reading aloud to a group?	☐	☐
Do teachers encourage children to use language to ask for materials and join in activities?	☐	☐
Do adults have frequent conversations with children on topics of interest to the children?	☐	☐

Preschool and Kindergarten Inclusion Readiness Checklist

For Children with Intellectual Disabilities

	Yes	Not yet
Can the program provide toys and materials that may fall outside the typical age/developmental range of the children enrolled? Explore lending libraries or other sources to borrow or purchase materials appropriate for children who are at an earlier developmental level.	☐	☐
Does the daily schedule allow for flexibility to accommodate varied attention levels?	☐	☐
Do teachers give children cues before transitions occur and describe the steps to follow for activities and routines? Smooth and predictable transitions help children learn what to do and experience success.	☐	☐
Do teachers individualize teaching and use opportunities for repetition for children who may need more time or experiences to learn?	☐	☐
Do teachers have enough materials and activity centers to keep up with children with different attention spans? Provide many options for activities for children to engage in. Track children's use of centers to prioritize space for high-interest activities. Consider creating a toy lending library or request gently used items from families. Encourage suggestions from parents about children's preferred activities.	☐	☐

For Children with Sensory Integration Concerns

Does the room have a quiet area with soothing materials and activities for children who become overstimulated or fatigued? Create a special quiet place furnished with a small lamp. Or dim lighting through the use of partitions, curtains, or another creative structure.	☐	☐
Does the program offer indoor gross motor activities daily? Use the large group area, hallways, or an empty room for daily movement activities using riding toys, mats or other cushioning materials, soft balls, hoops, and other equipment.	☐	☐
Does the daily schedule provide a predictable mix of active and quiet activities?	☐	☐
Do teachers provide a wide range of appealing and interesting sensory materials, such as sand and water play, and frequently expand/change those materials if necessary?	☐	☐
Can children choose whether and how to use materials? A child with sensory integration concerns may refuse to touch paint, playdough, or other squishy materials. Respect a child's preferences by being ready with alternative resources or activities.	☐	☐
Can children choose which foods to eat and how much to eat?	☐	☐
Does the classroom offer too much visual stimulation? If there are too many items on the walls and too many materials on the shelves, some children may feel overwhelmed. Remove items children no longer use, and rotate displays of children's art and other useful environmental print.	☐	☐

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Preschool and Kindergarten Inclusion Readiness Checklist

Special Considerations for Outdoor Spaces

Often, programs serving children with disabilities find it particularly challenging to provide accessible outdoor equipment to meet the unique needs of different children. Such equipment can be quite costly. Outdoor play offers children unique opportunities to develop language, play, and motor skills (Flynn & Kieff 2002). Review the following basic features that allow all children to interact with each other and enjoy the same areas.

	Yes	Not yet
Can children playing in different areas of the playscape maintain eye contact and interact with each other? To increase communication between children in different areas, add intermediary, raised playing areas accessible to all children or mirrors, speaking funnels, pulleys, and other interactive features.	☐	☐
Does the program provide a variety of outdoor play activities (for example, painting, planting a garden, playing with puppets)? Outdoor play should provide multisensory learning activities for all children, but these opportunities are especially critical for children with special needs (Flynn & Kieff 2002). Additionally, planning a classroom activity to take outside each day can increase outdoor options. Almost any activity that children can do indoors can also take place outdoors.	☐	☐
Are all areas of outdoor play accessible to all children? Children using mobility equipment should be able to play and learn in all areas of the playground. If there are barriers, such as large steps or landscaping borders, that prohibit access, remove them if possible or create alternate pathways. Ultimately, the goal for children is to interact with the environment with as much independence as possible.	☐	☐
Are outdoor surfaces even enough so all children can move safely? If not, raise mulch and grassy areas to the same heights as the paved areas. Additionally, steps should be level and in good repair.	☐	☐
Do wheeled toys allow for a variety of motor skill development? Offer wagons, trikes (including trikes with backseats for riders) and riding toys with and without pedals.	☐	☐

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