

A photograph of a smiling woman with blonde hair holding a baby. Another person's face is visible in the background, also smiling. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent dark red filter.

Building Belonging for Infants and Toddlers: Strategies for Inclusive Child Care Experiences

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INCLUSION INSTITUTE 2026

Today's Objectives

1

Describe the defining features of high-quality inclusion and what those look like for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families in child care settings.

2

Review research and resources on the inclusion of infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families specific to child care experiences.


3

Learn strategies that promote belonging and inclusion at systems, state, and program levels.

4

Develop an action plan to strengthen inclusion and collaboration within your own program, team, or community.

Introductions

A photograph of several young children sitting on a light-colored floor, playing with colorful wooden blocks. The child in the center foreground is a young girl with curly brown hair, wearing a blue and white checkered shirt, focused on stacking a red block with a green one. To her left, another child in a red and white plaid shirt is also playing with blocks. To her right, a boy in a yellow and blue plaid shirt is looking down at his blocks. The background is slightly blurred, showing other children and a bright, indoor setting. The text "The Context of Inclusive Early Childhood Education" is overlaid in white, centered on the image.

The Context of Inclusive Early Childhood Education

Definitions for today

Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities: children ages 0-36 month with diagnosed disabilities, identified delays in their development and learning, and those at-risk for delays or disabilities. They may be receiving Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C services (*or early intervention*)

Child Care any programs that serve children and families that including (but not limited to) center-based child care, family/home-based child care, faith-based programs, park district/recreational programs, Early/Head Start, family/friend/neighbor (FFN) care.

What is equity and inclusion?

The state that would be achieved if individuals fared the same way in society regardless of race, gender, class, language, disability or any other social or cultural characteristic.

Equity means all children and families receive necessary supports in at timely fashion so that can develop their full intellectual, social, and physical potential.

From NAEYC (2019)

Some things we need to recognize to impact change:

Definitions of inclusion, equity, equality, and discrimination

Systemic racism, ableism, and all forms of oppression

Personal contributions

We may need to unlearn, relearn, and learn differently

Definition of Inclusion

Early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and their family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society.

The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential.

The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and supports.

[DEC/NAEYC \(2009\); Policy Statement on Inclusion of Young Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs \(2023\)](#)

DEC/NAEYC Inclusion Statement (2009)



Access

- * Access to services
- * Universal Design for Learning



Participation

- * Tiered support
- * Embedded learning
- * Individualization



Supports

- * Collaboration
- * Systemic coordination
- * Ongoing adult learning

Sense of Belonging

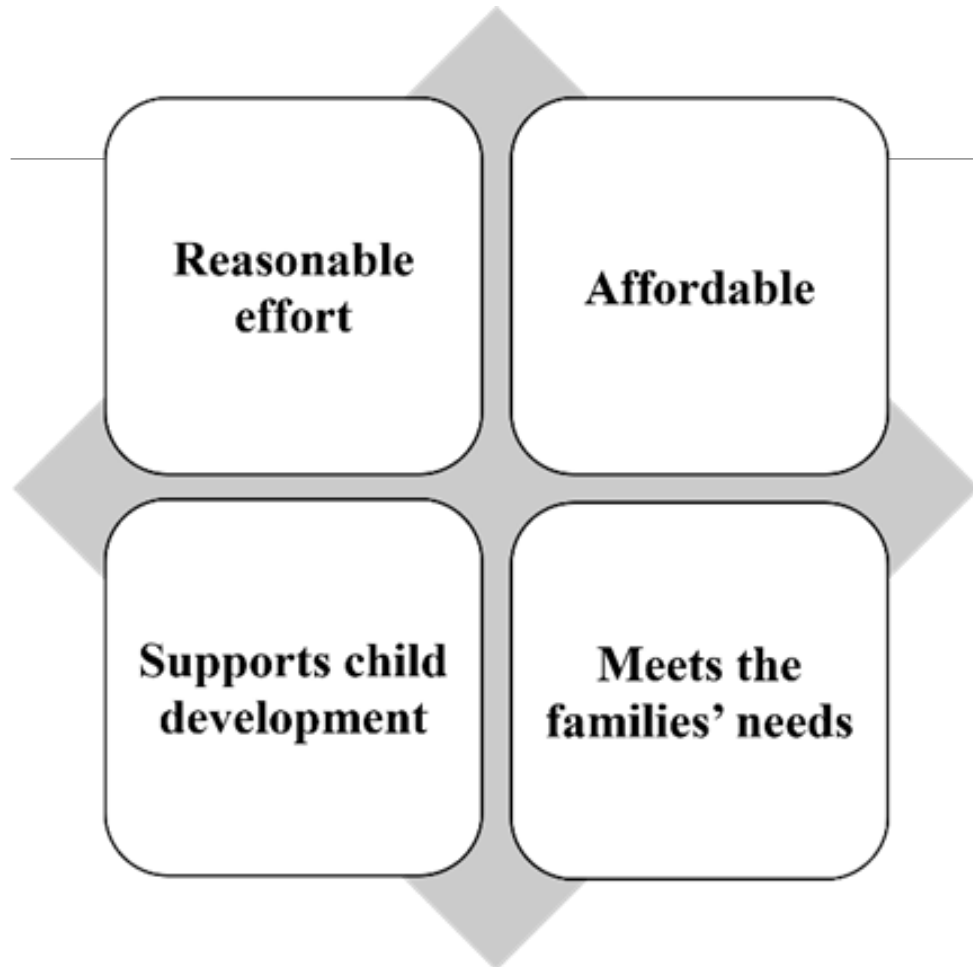


Rightful Presence

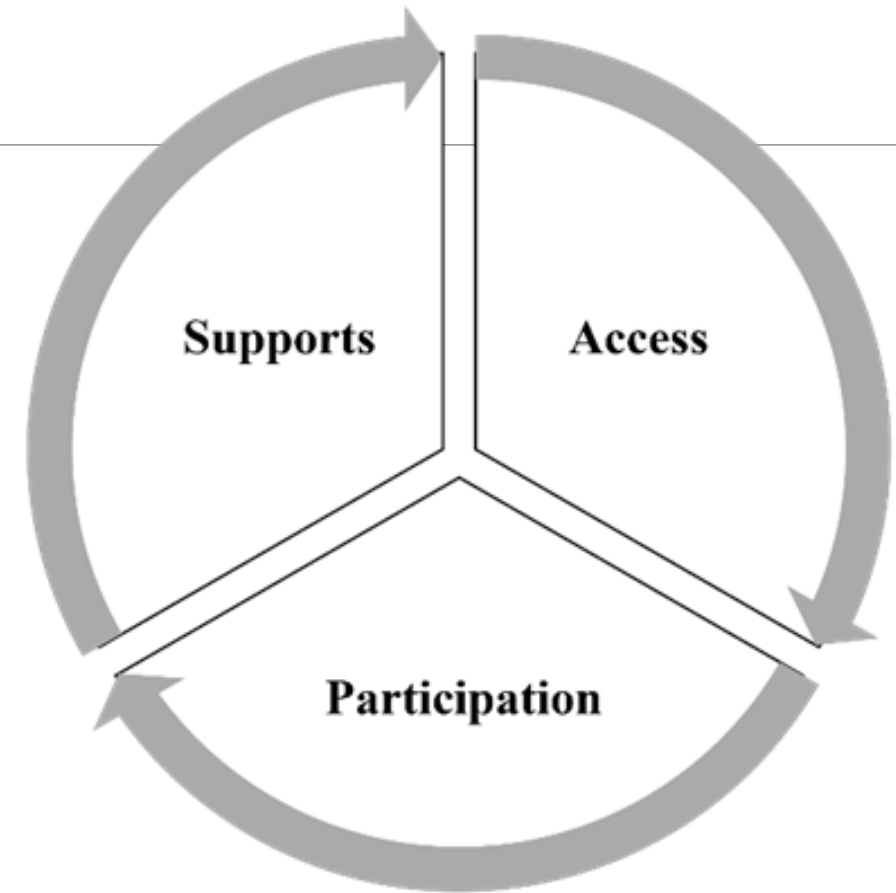
For children with disabilities and their families, rightful presence means more than physically being in the same space at the same time. It means ensuring access, participation, and supports to promote belonging. It also means that our systems are built for and enriched by children with disabilities. Currently, our systems treat children with disabilities as invited guests who gain value from being included rather than as members who belong and enrich our systems (National Center on Inclusion Toward Rightful Presence).

--DEC/NAEYC (2026)

Child Care Access and Inclusion



Dimensions of Child Care Access
(Friese et al., 2017)



Pillars of Early Childhood Inclusion
(DEC & NAEYC, 2009)

What is unique to families
of infants and toddlers
with disabilities in
accessing child care?

What does access look like for infants and toddlers?

Affordability

- Offer additional or prioritize funds for children with disabilities
- Infant care is expensive across the country (up to 35% of income)

Reasonable Efforts

- Welcomes children with disabilities into programs
- Includes specific policies, practices, or infrastructure to implement inclusion and partnership with EI

Supports Child Development

- Screening and assessment policies and practice support early identification and referral
- Has great potential to support child development—especially social/emotional development with peers

Meet Family Needs

- Many program types are available in communities and during hours families need
- Curated supports for families is helpful and support in navigating services

What does inclusion look like for infants & toddlers?

Access

- Providing access to a wide range of learning opportunities, activities, settings, and environments is a defining feature of high quality early childhood inclusion.
- Supporting families in finding care that meets their needs (e.g., location, hours, affordability)

Participation

- Supports to children so they participate fully in play and learning activities with peers and adults.
 - Routine-based and play-based learning
 - Social emotional learning with same age peers
 - Responsive interactions with caregivers, other adults, and children
 - Including infants and toddlers meaningfully in all program activities and materials

Support

- An infrastructure of systems-level supports must be in place to undergird the efforts of individuals and organizations providing inclusive services to children and families.
- Collaboration across child care and EI at both state and program levels (including shared training)

Belonging

- Making families and children feel part of the program community and culture
- Grounding program philosophy, vision, mission, and all policies and procedures in inclusion
- Preventing exclusionary practices



Creating a sense of belonging and inclusion for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families is hard...**because we've made it so.**

Words are Powerful

We aren't
equipped for
your child.

You should find
another place
that can handle
your child.

We don't know
anything about
your child's
disability.

There is
something
wrong with your
child.

We need help so
your child can
be with the
normal children.

Perspectives of Families

- Limited access to affordable and accessible programs
- Long waitlists and taking whatever is available
- Difficulty finding program that 'accept' their children
- Lack of programs willing to create relationships across early childhood and special education programs
- Lack of program-wide and administrative support to facilitate inclusive practices
- Increased likelihood of employment disruptions and lower incomes
- Increases sense of loneliness and isolation

Feeling broken

Failure as a parent

Unsustainable using multiple services

Responsible for coordination

Heaven sent

Felt like I could enjoy being a parent

Feel my child is part of the group

Weight off my shoulders

What are the barriers to inclusion for infants and toddlers from your experiences?

**TALK TO YOUR
NEIGHBOR ABOUT THE
MAJOR ISSUES.**

Overcome the Issues

Issues

Once we get child care solved for other children, we'll address the needs of children with disabilities

Due to workforce shortages—we can't require more training

Child care programs won't allow EI professionals in their programs.
EI professionals provide services in a separate room in the child care.

We can't share information with each other

We have separate training systems so we can't learn together

It is a liability issue

We don't have time for collaboration

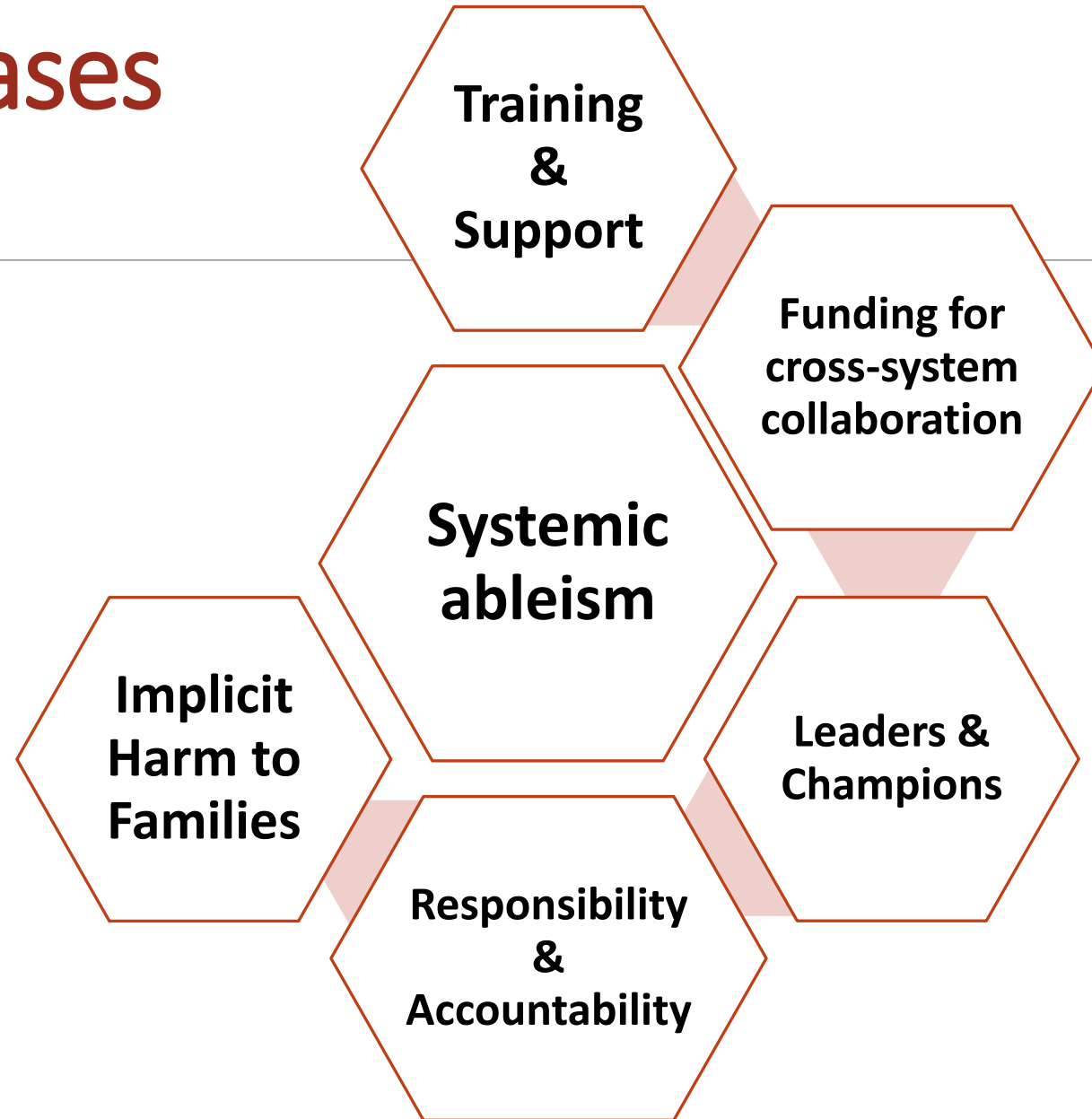
We need more money for this.

Get Your Head in the Game

**HOW TO REFLECT AND RESET YOUR
MIND FOR INCLUSION**

Think about a time when
you had to do something
you didn't want to do

Beliefs and Biases



Equity and Inclusion Starts with You

Beliefs drive our practices and interactions.

We all have prior knowledge and experiences that explicitly and implicitly ground our beliefs (this is ok).

Developmentally appropriate practice is inclusive.

From NAEYC Advancing Equity (2019)

Recognize your own implicit biases and how they influences your practices.

Seek out information and experiences that all you to grow and learn.

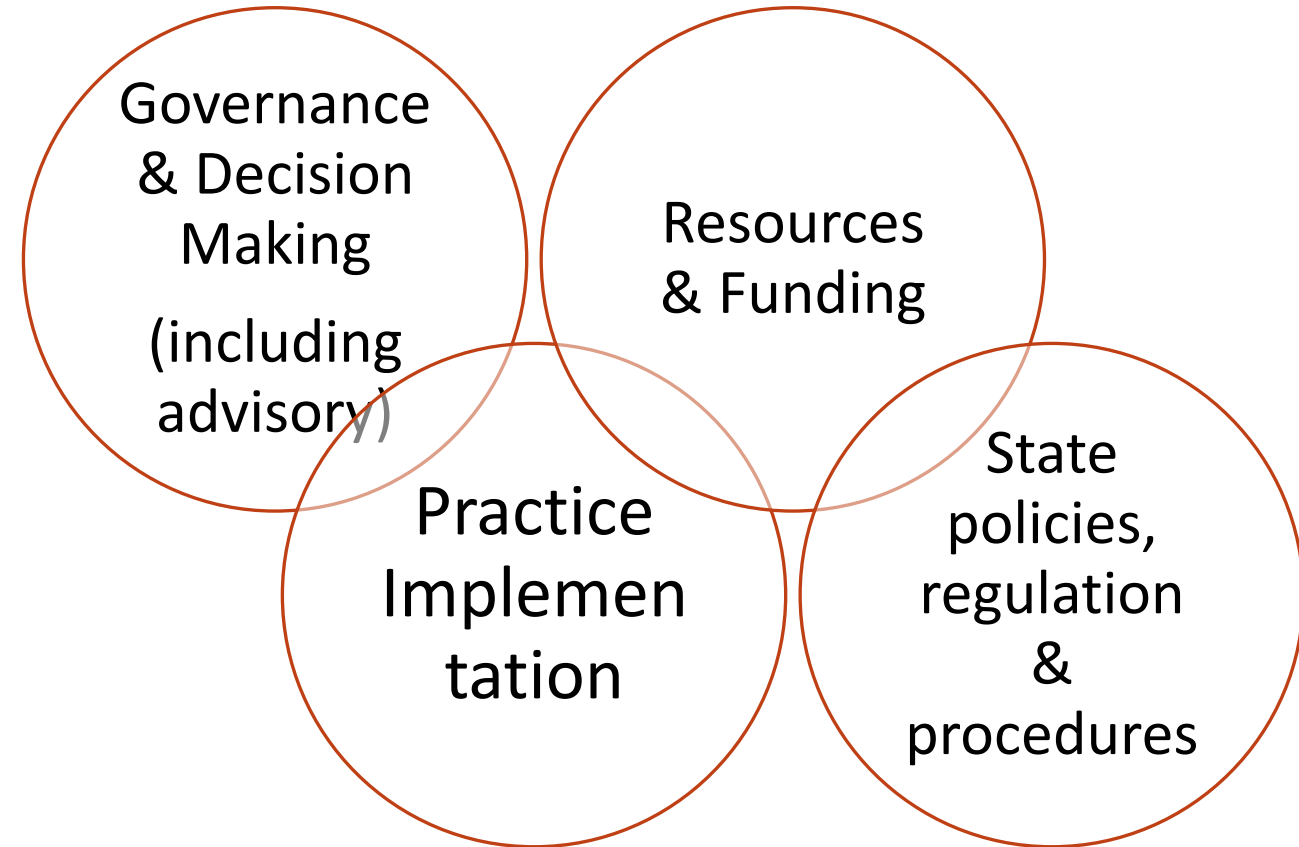
Consider inclusion as a natural and integral part of your work.

Systems Level Considerations

Systems Consideration

Consider:

- What are current partnerships?
- What exists?
- What is similar, different, or shared across child care and EI?
- What is missing?
- What is flexible?
- What supports inclusion and partnership? What is a barrier to inclusion and partnership?
- Who needs to be involved for systems change and implementation?



Issues at Systems Levels

ISSUES IDENTIFIED IN STATE POLICIES

'All means all' approach

Policies are present for children with disabilities and infants and toddlers (but not specifically infants and toddlers with disabilities)

Disability is often omitted in child care policies.

Child care is often omitted from disability policies.

Policies meet the minimum law and aspirational but lack support for meaningful implementation

Complicated systems trying to combine

ISSUES REPORTED BY STATE LEADERS

Overburdened state employees—so many things to do within their program, cannot add any more

Different offices, different procedures, different time availability, different funding streams

Decision makers may be disconnected to experiences of families and programs

Lack of specialized expertise and training for providers

Lack of awareness of potential for inclusion and partnership

List of potential state components to consider

Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) Plans

QRIS/QIS Indicators

Child care licensing requirements

Child care and Part C policy manuals

Part C Annual reports and SSIPs

State strategic plans (e.g., Head Start Collaborations, advisory councils)

Systems analyses

Training system offerings

State professional requirements

Inclusion and exclusion policies

Forms (enrollment, partnership)

Advisory boards/council membership

Decision trees

Address Systemic Structures

- Review state and program policies on collaboration and information sharing.
- Protect confidential information and obtain appropriate consents. Parental consent is essential.
- Develop safety and liability procedures.
- Dedicated and compensated teaming time.
- Consider developing Memorandums of Understandings (MOUs)

Program and Professional Level Considerations

**I felt good
because I have
you as a friend.**

--Frog, Frog & Toad

**BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS
TO SUPPORT INCLUSION**





It is the **collective responsibility** of the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children to center the needs and realities of those who are most negatively impacted by systemic inequity. We advance and shape leadership, research, policy, and practice that supports, engages, and informs those who care for, educate, and work on behalf of young children with or at risk for developmental delays and disabilities. DEC works to identify, interrogate, and dismantle systemic inequities so that young children and their families thrive.

DIVISION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD MISSION

Issues From Professionals

Seeing inclusion of children with disabilities as supplemental rather than integral

Lack of professional knowledge and confidence about disability

Lack of program-wide and administrative support to facilitate inclusive and family partnership practices

Too many things 'on the plate' for the state in early childhood—feeling a lack of support

High turnover and low compensation—impacting 'buy in' and training needs

Time, money, and personnel

Components of Partnership

Respect

Communication

Commitment

Collaboration

Think of your most important partnership—what are the critical ingredients?

Do you see these ingredients happening in professional partnership and collaboration?

Relationships Across Early Childhood and EI Programs



Understanding Each Other

Program Purpose and Philosophy

Professional Respect for Each Other

Communities of Practice

Relationship Building—Shared Learning

**If we are never are
never sharing
space—why do we
expect professionals
to work together?**

How do your programs or agencies promote shared:

- Understanding and knowledge
- Expectations
- Terminology
- Practices
- Communication systems
- Referral systems
- Information sharing

Leader's Role in Inclusion

Program leaders:

- have a more consistent interaction with families over years
 - set the tone and model practice
 - establish and reinforce partnership policies, procedures, and practices
 - support staff in their own learning and growth
 - identify and fix issues
-
- You do not need to do this alone.
 - Programs with inclusion champions—have stronger inclusive practices.
 - You can all be a leader!

Strategies for Leaders:

Seek out your own professional development and build your support community.

Recognize and repair ableism.

Evaluate your program from an inclusive lens—what is supporting or discouraging inclusion.

Deeply review each aspect of your program (e.g., vision, mission, philosophy, staffing, curricula, data and assessment, relationships with other programs and services) then enhance or change these to demonstrate your dedication to inclusion.

Hire people with an inclusive philosophy and provide ongoing training.

Ask for help when you need to.

Key take away

Please take a moment to think about 1 thing you want to do from what we discussed today.

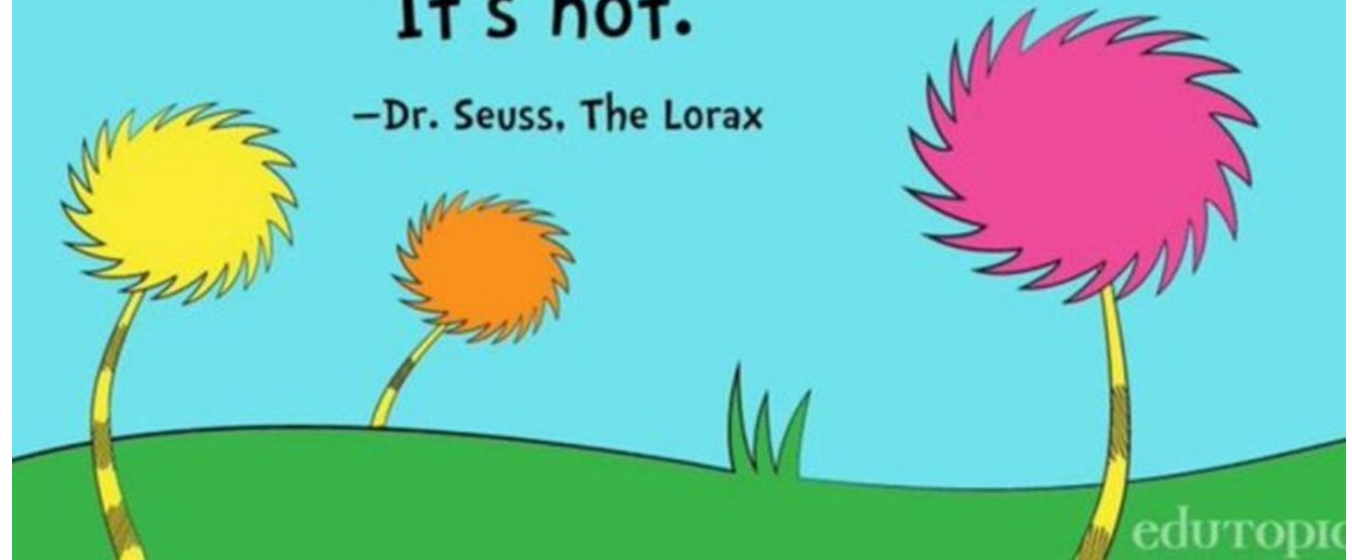
This can be many things including:

- Look at resources from today
- Connecting with another participant
- Reflect on own practice
- Reach out to 1 family member
- Reading an article on the topic
- Watching a video or film on the topic

Please write your 1 takeaway down—share it with your neighbor—text it to a friend.

**Unless someone like you
cares a whole awful lot,
Nothing is going to get better.
It's not.**

—Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax*



SMILE (ing) is my favorite!

| | |
|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Systemic | All levels working together (federal, state, local, institutions of higher education (personnel prep, research), administrators, practitioners, families) |
| Meaningful | Intentional practice towards inclusion Relevant to children, families, and communities |
| Inclusive | More than children in the same physical space but membership, a sense of belonging, access, participation, and support |
| Learning | Developmentally appropriate instruction across all domains of learning (including differentiation and individualization) |
| Experiences | Valuing the experiences children and family have and bring to your program. |

(Hile, O'Grady, & Weglarz-Ward)

The Next Chapter or Sequel?

Now, consider what you need to make a difference related to inclusion of infants and toddlers with disabilities and developmental delays and their families.

What is your power character or title of your story?



Thank you!

STAY IN TOUCH AT

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Resources

HAVING FUN ISN'T HARD IF YOU
HAVE A LIBRARY CARD (OR
ACCESS TO GREAT RESOURCES!)



Potential Collaboration Points

| | Part C System | Child Care System |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Program Awareness | <p>Share EI information with Child Care Resource and Referral, subsidy, and early childhood councils</p> <p>Share definitions and examples of natural environments</p> | <p>Share child care information with EI programs including different types of programs, curriculum, assessment, and centralized systems.</p> |
| Child/Family Enrollment | <p>If family indicates they use child care: Share the benefits of teaming with child care for EI services Ask how they would like their child care programs to be involved Complete any information sharing paperwork</p> | <p>If child is already receiving services—ask how you can support them in their EI journey. Offer to meet with EI team including attending IFSP meetings. Complete any information sharing paperwork.</p> |

Potential Collaboration Points (continued)

| | Part C System | Child Care System |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| During developmental screening and evaluation | Partner with child care program to include additional forms of assessment (e.g., assessments, portfolios, observations) | Partners with EI program to share assessment information Offer to complete assessments at child care program |
| While child attends child care | Meet with project leadership and staff to build relationships. Learn about curriculum, assessments, schedules, and staffing Set up communication system Learn about child's routines Provide resources on embedded learning and disability-specific strategies Coach caregivers | Meet with EI team to build relationships Learn about their approaches and coaching models Set up communication system and planning time Support staff in understanding EI Provide support to welcome EI services into program Embed IFSP outcomes and instructional strategies into daily routines |

Introduction to Early Intervention



An Early Intervention Visit

An EI Visit

- You and your family are active participants in EI visits.
- Support** - You and your provider will work with your child to increase participation in everyday activities. Your provider may watch you with your child and give you new ideas and show you ways to support your child's participation.
- Coaching and Learning** - With your desired outcomes in mind, the provider serves as a coach showing you strategies to work with your child and help your child learn. You can practice these strategies with their support and ask questions to ensure you are using the strategies correctly.
- Focus and Follow-up** - Your provider may ask what changes you've seen in your child and how things have been going since your last visit.
 - Review new information about your child
 - Consider new information about your child and family that the provider may need to know.
 - You and the provider will come up with a focus for the visit at the beginning of the session together.
- Questions** - Feel free to ask questions about how and why these strategies were chosen and how you can use them in daily activities.

Wrapping up the Visit

- The provider may suggest services and supports that your family might find helpful.
- Your provider can also help you plan ways to use what you have learned during the visit as part of daily life with your child.

Where to Get More Information

- Early Intervention Clearinghouse**
eiclearinghouse.org
 A library of videos, books, manuals, and journals related to the development of young children with special needs and their families. This free resource ships materials directly to families. The web site lists other resources in the state and nationwide.
- Illinois Early Learning Project**
illinoisearlylearning.org
 This project delivers information about learning and development guidelines in Illinois as well as resources for staff and parents on a variety of early childhood topics.
- eXtension Parenting**
www.extension.org/parenting
 This program provides reliable parenting information and strategies for children birth through age five. Check out their Just in Time Parenting e-learnings which are specific to your child's age and needs.

EITP Working in Child Care as an EI Provider

Child care settings are ideal for early intervention services. They have regular routines, play-based and child-centered activities, and opportunities for peer interaction. Additionally, many programs run all day and year-round providing continuity of care. Providing quality, coordinated care between child care and early intervention (EI) can improve child and family outcomes.

If the family requests services in the childcare setting, it is important to establish a respectful, collaborative relationship with the child care provider (CCP). To be effective and respectful, you should take time to learn about the child care program philosophy, schedule, routines as well as staff roles and responsibilities. In turn, you can share information about the EI process, your role, what to expect during an EI visit, and their role in EI. With the family's permission, share and discuss the IFSP with child care providers.

Discuss with family members how they would like to involve their child care provider in early intervention.



EITP EARLY INTERVENTION TRAINING PROGRAM

Natural Partners in Natural Environments: Childcare & Early Intervention



Ways to Involve Child Care Providers

- During evaluation & assessment**
CCPs can provide valuable information about the child's skills and behavior during their care.
- During plan development**
CCPs can provide information about daily routines, child preferences, and changes experienced in the childcare setting.
- Throughout Intervention**
CCPs can utilize and help to recommend strategies to support child's development during routines and activities.

During visits

- Follow the visitor policies of the child care provider.
- Take time to work with the child care provider on your plans.
- Greet any plans for your visit.
- Share intervention with the child care provider.
- Embed intervention with daily routines, and practice with the child.
- Ask the childcare provider for suggested strategies.
- Model intervention with the child.
- Discuss how these techniques are used in the functional outcomes of the child.
- Allow time for questions from the provider.
- Discuss supporting the provider's coaching strategies.

A Guide to Early Intervention Services in Illinois

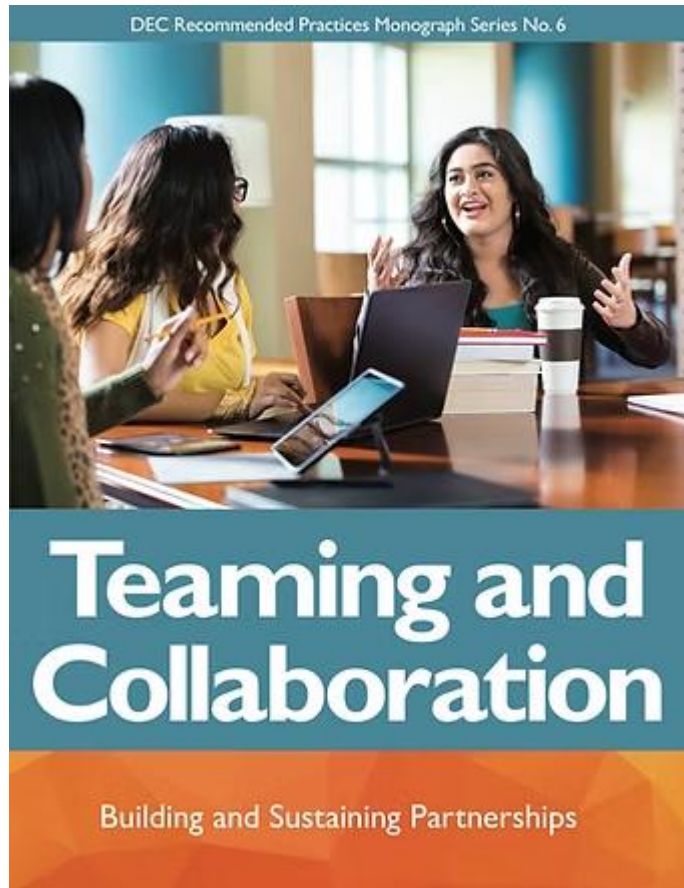
Early Intervention and Child Care...Natural Partners in Natural Environments



Natural Partners in Natural Environments

WEGLARZ, WARD (2018)

Collaboration in Child Care Settings: Using Teaming to Support Infants & Toddlers with Disabilities



5

Collaboration in Child Care Settings Using Teaming to Support Infants and Toddlers With Disabilities

JENNA M. WEGLARZ-WARD
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

DEC Learning Deck (\$25)

This 1 hour online recorded training provides strategies and resources to support program-level and individual-level practices.



Building Inclusive State Child Care Systems

This guide provides guidance to state systems across Part C, Part B, and child care (specifically CCDF plans) to support inclusive policies

Building Inclusive State Child Care Systems

Division for Early Childhood & Start Early



Indicators for High Quality Inclusion

Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion

Children with disabilities receive care in a variety of settings including schools, childcare centers, Head Start programs, and family child care environments. Yet, families encounter difficulties in securing care for their children with disabilities, leading to a reliance on fragmented settings and services, as outlined in the Center for Child and Family Success' [Start with Equity: 14 Priorities to Dismantle Systemic Racism in Early Care and Education](#). Children with disabilities from Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) populations and dual language learners (DLLs) face challenges in receiving equitable and inclusive access, experiences and outcomes.

These four sets of indicators were designed by a group of [national partners](#) to respond to the evolving needs of the early childhood education system. The Inclusion Indicators should be used as a capacity building tool rather than a performance checklist or assessment. The Inclusion Indicators help teams implement inclusive practices at all system levels: state, community, local program, and environments where children receive care. They also help teams discuss barriers to inclusion and develop effective solutions. The Inclusion Indicators are written broadly enough to allow state, community, and local program teams to implement inclusion in various settings, and specifically enough to be a coaching tool once implementation plans are developed.

 [State Indicators](#)

 [Community Indicators](#)

 [Local Program Indicators](#)

 [Early Care and Education Environment Indicators](#)

 [Glossary](#)

Read, Watch, and Learn

Books

Disability Visibility by Alice Wong

Unteachables: Disability Rights and the Invention of Black Special Education Disability Rights and the Invention of Black Special Education by Keith Mayes

Every Child Can Fly: An Early Childhood Educator's Guide to Inclusion by Jani Kozlowski

Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons from the Struggle for Social Justice by Stephen Preskill and Stephen Brookfield

Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to Be an Ally by Emily Ladau

Movies, videos and other media

[Crip Camp](#)

Life Animated

[Disrupting Implicit Bias in Early Childhood Program](#)

[Considering Culture and Equity in Teaching and Learning](#)

[Forget Me Not](#)

[Parenting a Disabled Child: Nurturing Self Worth](#)