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Coach's Corner



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In the field of education, we talk about the concept of inclusion often. But what do we actually mean? More specifically, what does this look like in early childhood education? NAEYC defines inclusion as, “the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society”. Ideally, all programs would weave this policy into the fabric of their program, but what does it look like to put this policy into practice?

Program Policy

If your program has a written inclusion policy, you have already completed the first step! If not, think about your program’s mission or philosophy. How can you work inclusion into these ideals? A policy statement should include the importance of inclusion, as well as the program’s efforts to provide a more inclusive experience for all children. Remember that language matters. Do your policies & communication with families use people-first language? For example, we should say “children with disabilities” or “children with special needs” rather than “disabled children”. NAEYC’s Position Statement on Inclusion (linked below) is a great place to start when looking for information.



When moving from policy to practice it is helpful to think in terms of environment and program planning. Consider what the program is currently doing to promote inclusion and where there is room for improvement. This will provide an opportunity to build off the program's strengths.

Environment

- Room arrangement- Start by looking at the physical space(s) of the program. Are there any barriers preventing children from accessing furniture or materials? Think about creating a new floor plan to make adjustments for children who may need more space.
- Technology- Think about using technology as a communication tool if there are children who need extra support. Talk to the families to see what types of technology the child uses at home. What technology would be available to use in your program?
- Schedule- Add a picture schedule to your space at the children's line of vision. Make sure each part of the day is illustrated with a picture. This could be clip art/pictures found online or photos of children in the class at various times during the day. An educator could also carry the same pictures with them during the day (try using index cards on a ring) to help remind children of upcoming transitions. This is helpful for children who may have difficulty moving from one activity to another.
- Representation- Take a look at classroom materials. Would each child and their family feel represented? This includes books, displays, and materials. When purchasing new materials, be intentional about choices. It is important for all children to see materials that reflect the different children and families in our society.
- Materials- Consider the children in your program and their specific needs. Some examples of this could be, providing different sized pencil grippers on markers and crayons for children having difficulty with writing, or adding knobs to puzzles to help with fine motor skills. Another idea is using a baby blow up pool to confine materials such as blocks for children who are immobile (Wisconsin Department of Children & Families).

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Program Planning

- Professional development- Provide opportunities for educators to participate in ongoing professional development on inclusion. Follow-up with educators regarding how they will use what they have learned in their practice.
- Schedule accommodations- It is important for all children to have access to the services that they need. Early childhood programs are a great place for children to receive therapy and/or other outside services. It gives the therapist a chance to interact with the child in their natural environment in which they are most comfortable. Therapists should be encouraged to work with the child in their classroom, rather than pulling them out to work in a separate space. All children can benefit from the experience. Whenever possible, it is important for programs to adjust schedules to accommodate these needs. This also provides a great opportunity for educators to form a relationship with the therapist/specialist to better support the child. It is equally important to accommodate children who may leave for part of the day to receive services at a different location.
- Community connections- Consider reaching out to local organizations that support families and children with special needs. This is an opportunity to obtain resources on how your program can better serve these families. These types of relationships also lead to better support and a sense of community for the families.
- Events and activities- When planning your family events or activities, it is important to take into consideration the individual needs of the children and their families. What special accommodations would need to be made? If there is an activity that is not inclusive of all children the program leaders may want to consider another option.

When considering inclusion, it is most critical to focus on the individual child's abilities rather than a diagnosis or disability. NAEYC mentions in their position statement that programs should have high expectations for ALL children enrolled. Regardless of ability, all children can benefit from inclusion. It has been widely recognized that inclusion is beneficial to all children, not just those with special needs. Children learn to be accepting of differences at an early age. Typically developing children can be involved in problem-solving and making accommodations for their peers. When provided with a positive, inclusive environment, children of all abilities have the chance to thrive.

Resources

NAEYC Position Statement- https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/DEC_NAEYC_EC_updatedKS.pdf

Wisconsin Department of Children and Families- <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youngstar/eci/about>

Head Start Inclusion Webinars- <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/children-disabilities/article/inclusion-webinars>

Every Child Belongs: Welcoming a Child with a Disability
(NAEYC)- <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/sep2017/every-child-belongs>

Professional Development

Inclusion: Best Practice- DIEEC Online PD