

Inclusion

The State of Michigan is committed to assuring all young children with special needs receive high-quality services and supports which will enable them to be active and successful participants during the early childhood years and in the future in a variety of settings. Providing high-quality early childhood experiences make a positive difference in the lives of young children.

High-quality education is ideally supported best in the least restrictive environment (LRE). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (*IDEA- P.L. 108-446 Section 612(a)(5)(A)*) and (*§300.114 through §300.118*) has requirements to ensure that children with disabilities are educated in settings with their typically developing peers to the maximum extent appropriate for that child. In April of 2009, the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) published a joint position statement to define early childhood inclusion. Inclusive practices take on many different forms and are unique to each and every early childhood program.

According to the DEC/NAEYC position statement the defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high quality early childhood programs and services are **access, participation,** and **support**. **Access** refers to assuring a variety of learning opportunities, activities and environments are modified so every child can have access to the learning environment. As access provides a solution to the physical barriers, **participation** can be accomplished by individualizing instruction for each child to participate fully in play and learning activities. All children have special learning needs. Adapting the curriculum to meet those needs will result in high-quality inclusive education. In addition to ensuring access and participation, an infrastructure of system-level **support** must be in place. Key personnel; teachers, specialists,

support staff, and administrators; should have access to ongoing professional development and support to acquire the knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices. Collaboration among teachers, specialists, and administrators is the foundation for implementing high-quality early childhood inclusion. Program policies are needed to promote multiple opportunities for communication and collaboration among key stakeholders. Specialized services and therapies should be implemented in a coordinated method and integrated with general early care and education services. One example is blending early childhood special education and early childhood education programs together. High-quality inclusion prepares all students for adult life in an inclusive society (Wolery, 2003). "High-quality environment and supports for classroom staff, must characterize all inclusive early childhood settings to ensure desirable outcomes for all children, especially children with disabilities."

Inclusive programs offer many benefits for children with and without disabilities, families of children with and without disabilities, and the community. Those benefits include, but are not limited to:

- meaningful friendships
- peer role models
- higher expectations
- increased parent participation
- greater opportunities for collaboration

With the increasing roles and requirements of personnel responsible for related services, i.e. speech therapy, physical therapy and occupational therapy, collaboration among professionals is crucial. Embedded therapy teaches the whole child to be functional in everyday living, provides therapy within the classroom curriculum, and allows children to learn skills that are needed in a

meaningful environment. Children do not miss out on learning experiences by being pulled out of the classroom and teachers are able to learn and collaborate with the therapist to appropriately individualize instruction.

With the concept of teaching functional skills in a meaningful context, it is necessary to assess those skills. Collection of data on functional child outcomes is essential for planning and implementing individualized instruction for all children.