



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



Curriculum decision making for inclusive practice

Educators'... develop the program based on their sound knowledge of each child so that the experiences, interactions and routines each child engages in are relevant to them, respectful of their background and recognise and build on their current interests and abilities.'

Guide to the National Quality Standard (NQS) (ACECQA, 2011, p. 23).

Setting the scene

Children can experience ongoing, temporary or recurrent additional needs for a variety of reasons including:

- having a disability
- living in complex or vulnerable circumstances
- particular considerations because of cultural, linguistic or family background.

This e-Newsletter focuses on inclusion of children who have additional needs because of a disability. These children may have specific requirements arising from a:

- diagnosed physical, sensory, intellectual or autism spectrum disorder
- behavioural or psychological disorder
- communication, learning or developmental delay (ACECQA, 2011, p. 202).

What is inclusive practice?

Inclusive practice occurs when educators make thoughtful and informed curriculum decisions and work in partnership with families and other professionals. This helps to ensure that all children—including those with a disability—have equitable and genuine opportunities to participate in and learn from the everyday routines, interactions and play and learning experiences that occur in early learning settings.

The *Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)* describes inclusive practice in the description of supportive learning environments as '... vibrant and flexible spaces that are responsive to the interests and abilities of each child. They cater for different learning capacities and learning styles and invite children and families to contribute ideas, interests and questions' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15).

The service philosophy

The first step in creating an inclusive curriculum is considering the service philosophy and its expression of commitment to genuinely inclusive practice. As Barnes (*NQS PLP e-Newsletter No.28*, 2012, p. 1) wrote: 'The philosophy is the "why" behind your work with children, their families and each other. It is the combination of your beliefs, values and hopes for the educational program that you provide and its outcomes.'

Discussing the following reflective questions will assist educators, families and children to clarify their beliefs and values relating to including children who have a disability in the service:

- What is our understanding of the term 'disability'?
- What are our attitudes towards children who have a disability?
- Why do we believe that it is important to include children who have a disability in our setting? Who will benefit from this, and how?
- What does current research tell us about children who have a disability and their inclusion in early learning settings?



Making curriculum decisions

When educators make curriculum decisions with the aim of inclusion, they base their decisions on what they know about each child and their strengths, needs, interests and abilities. They apply that knowledge to planned learning experiences, routines, interactions and the physical environment. It is important to keep in mind that the term 'curriculum' refers not only to specific planned activities, but to all of the planned and unplanned 'interactions, experiences, routines and events' that occur in the early learning setting (ACECQA, 2011, p. 203; DEEWR, 2009, p. 9).

Curriculum decision making for inclusion of children with a disability is about creating opportunities for *all* children to engage in daily experiences, rather than planning alternative or separate experiences for any child. One of the challenges that educators can face in implementing genuine inclusion is sustaining it every day in all dimensions of the curriculum. Educators need to keep in mind the variety of experiences that contribute to children's learning every day, as well as what each child *already* knows, enjoys and can do. These considerations guide decisions and actions that will enhance children's learning opportunities.

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Decisions and actions to support inclusion

The EYLF asserts that '... to engage children actively in learning, educators identify children's strengths and interests, choose appropriate teaching strategies and design the learning environment' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9).

The physical environment

To maximise the participation of children who have a disability in daily play and learning experiences, educators create physical environments that support children to engage naturally with things that interest them. Physically inclusive spaces maximise each child's opportunity to:

- access and explore indoor and outdoor areas as independently as possible
- make choices about the resources they access and the experiences they participate in
- interact meaningfully with other children and adults
- care for themselves as independently as possible
- experience challenge and take managed risks
- engage with images, books and resources that reflect people with disabilities as active participants in and contributors to communities in a variety of ways.

When adapting the physical environment to include a child with a disability, educators think about what they need to alter or add to enable the child to manage daily routines and experiences as independently as possible. For example, a child with a communication or learning difficulty may benefit from using visual resources such as pictorial flow charts to help them understand and participate in the day's routines and activities. A child who experiences high levels of anxiety or behavioural issues may need a safe, quiet area to go to when they feel overwhelmed or want time away from the group. Such additions to the learning environment often benefit all children.

Learning experiences

To ensure that children who have a disability have every opportunity to participate in a full range of learning experiences, educators intentionally extend each child's learning by building on their strengths, interests and abilities in both planned and spontaneous learning experiences. Educators also respond to each child's individual circumstances and requirements. For example, a child with a sensory processing disorder may be more comfortable participating in a quiet, planned group movement experience such as yoga or Tai Chi than in a boisterous circle or parachute game.

When planning learning experiences, educators also support children's agency. As is true of all children, children with a disability want to make decisions about experiences they participate in and the directions those experiences take.





The role of partnerships

The EYLF recognises that 'Partnerships ... involve educators, families and support professionals working together to explore the learning potential in every day events, routines and play so that children with additional needs are provided with daily opportunities to learn from active participation and engagement in these experiences ...' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 12).

When working collaboratively with families, children and other professionals (therapists or specialists) to develop individual inclusion plans based on the child's needs, educators may seek information and strategies in relation to:

- accessing and using adaptive equipment
- learning specialist skills, for example, Makaton®
- developing and using visual communication systems
- recognising and responding to children's cues that they need assistance or support
- implementing individualised behaviour guidance strategies
- adapting specific routines and experiences to maximise the child's opportunities for independent participation
- accessing professional development to support their responsiveness to children with a disability.

Families, children and other professionals can provide educators with valuable information and insights about individual children's strengths, interests and needs and the strategies that will best assist them to participate fully. Effective partnerships also involve educators, families and other professionals sharing information about the child's ongoing experiences and achievements, and what works well to facilitate their inclusion. Genuinely collaborative partnerships between educators, children, families and other professionals help to ensure that every child has opportunities to *belong, be* and *become* in all of their life contexts.

Practice example one

Birrlee Kindergarten, located in NSW's Sutherland Shire, recently enrolled a three-year-old child who has a significant language delay. Lorna, the director, says that he takes great pleasure and pride in greeting educators and other children by name upon arrival each day. To recognise and build on this child's communication strengths, as well as his keen interest in singing, educators regularly incorporate the children's greeting song 'What do you think his/her name is?' into small group music and movement experiences for all children:

*Oh, what do you think his/her name is? I wonder if you know?
His/her name is '...' hello, hello, hello, hello, hello, hello.*

All the children enjoy the song, which is included to build on one child's interests and strengths.

Educators also actively engage all children in conversations that encourage them to question, hypothesise and extend their thinking. When there are children in the group with limited social skills because of a disability, educators have to think about the best ways to encourage participation in these conversations. For example, these children may find it easier to participate in play and learning experiences with a smaller number of children, or in experiences that involve very clear boundaries and expectations. A child with a language delay, or who is non-verbal, may need educators to support interactions through using visual or signed communication systems.



Practice example two

The grandmother of a toddler with a disability came in regularly to help the child settle in at the Gowrie Child Care Centre, NSW. She shared information with educators about the child's needs and what the family was doing at home to support her. The grandmother also provided educators with strategies to assist the child's inclusion in daily experiences. Educators regularly meet with the child's family to share information about her participation in the program and to learn about her experiences at home and with her therapist. The child's educators have put together a communication book that is used by the service, home and therapist to encourage everyone involved to share information.

Practice example three

Educators at Birralee Kindergarten use a digital camera to support communication with the family of a child who has a severe language delay. Each day they create a simple A4 printout of snapshots depicting the child's experiences during the day. They use this as a basis for describing the child's learning and achievements to his parents. One photo, for example, showed the child leading other children in a game of balancing on a log. Educators have found that this process helps to reassure the family that their child is a valued and included member of the early learning community.



Conclusion

Inclusion of children who have a disability is essentially about educators recognising that *all* children have the right to be engaged and valued participants in and contributors to the curriculum. It involves getting to know each child well so that they can respond to their needs and build on their strengths and skills to ensure they have equal opportunities to participate and learn.

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References

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Biography

Angela Owens lives in Sydney and is a freelance writer. She has worked as an early childhood educator and centre Director and was the editorial coordinator for the National Childcare Accreditation Council's (NCAC) resources *Putting children first* magazine and factsheets for educators and families.

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