



PACER'S

EARLY CHILDHOOD CONNECTION

Information and Resources for Parents of Young Children with Disabilities

Summer 2015

EARLY INCLUSION HELPS CHILDREN SUCCEED IN SCHOOL

As a parent, you want your child with disabilities to have the same opportunities as every other child: to learn, play, make friends, and have a sense of belonging. Learning alongside typical peers in an inclusive preschool environment can provide your child with these important experiences and lay the foundation for success in elementary school and beyond.

Monica Mayclin has seen firsthand just how valuable an inclusive setting has been for her daughter Madeline (pictured at right), who has Down syndrome. Now 6 years old, Madeline has been included with her typical peers since her third year of preschool. "From the very beginning, I shared with teachers and staff how important it was for Madeline to be included," said Monica. "I knew that it was key to helping her develop strong learning and social skills."

In preschool, Madeline learned and played beside her typical peers two out of the four days she attended each week. This experience helped prepare Madeline to be mainstreamed in kindergarten. "Being included with her peers from the very beginning of her schooling has had a phenomenal impact on her entire life," said Monica. "Her peers motivate her to learn and she has made many friends."

Inclusion Guidelines

The opportunity to spend time with typical children should be considered for all preschool children who



have an Individualized Education Program (IEP), says Judy Swett, PACER's Early Childhood Coordinator. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides the following inclusion guidelines for schools:

Early Inclusion continued on next page

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- Children ages 3 through 21 should receive services in the least restrictive environment and alongside children without disabilities as much as appropriate. “Appropriate” means that the education fits the child’s special needs and allows him or her to make educational progress.
- School districts must make sure that young children receive services in the least restrictive environment, even if the district does not have an early childhood preschool program. In these instances, the least restrictive environment could be a public or private early childhood program, including Early/Head Start and child care programs.
- The IEP team must consider what extra supports

will allow the child to be placed in a regular preschool environment whenever possible. Examples of supports might include assistive technology, behavior strategies, use of a resource room, or changes in the curriculum.

In a recently released draft policy statement, the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services support greater inclusion of children with all disabilities in early childhood programs. The agencies are urging states to create task forces focused on early childhood inclusion, implement policies and allocate funding to facilitate such programs, and set and track goals to expand inclusive learning opportunities.

Helpful tips you can use

Here are some tips to help ensure that your child is receiving services in an inclusive setting:

- **Talk about inclusion early and often** — From the moment your child is enrolled in a preschool program, tell teachers and staff about the importance of inclusion for your child. Communicate with staff about how inclusion is working for your child, and make sure they’re keeping you informed about the gains or challenges your child is facing. If your child is already enrolled in a preschool or child care setting, ask if services and supports could be provided in that setting. Provide the IEP team with data, including notes from the teacher, that show your child is doing well in that setting.
- **Gather information** — When the school proposes a setting, ask if that setting includes typically developing peers. Take a tour of the school and speak with teachers, staff members, the principal, and the special education director to understand all of the options available. If the team suggests that some services need to be provided outside of the inclusive setting, ask how much time your child will be removed and why.



- **Make the IEP meeting count** — Write down all of your concerns, goals, and questions before the meeting. Make sure the IEP team discusses any supports your child may need to be successful in the inclusive setting.
- **Surround yourself with allies** — Meet other parents who value inclusion and work with them to share ideas and resolve issues. If you have questions about your child’s IEP or the setting being proposed, call PACER at (952) 838-9000 and ask to speak with an early childhood advocate.

The Many Benefits of Inclusion

Research shows that children with disabilities, including those with the most significant disabilities and highest needs, can make significant learning progress in inclusive settings and demonstrate stronger social-emotional skills than their peers who are not included. Children in inclusive early childhood programs who transition into inclusive classrooms in elementary school demonstrate more social interactions with peers with and without disabilities, feel less alone, and have a stronger understanding of socially acceptable behaviors.

Inclusion can be achieved with specialized instruction; however, research shows that in order for children with disabilities to be effectively educated in an inclusive environment, they must be included with typically developing peers several days a week.

Monica worked with Madeline's preschool to ensure that the programs were tailored to meet her unique needs and that she had plenty of time to interact with her typical peers. As a result, Madeline quickly showed gains in her cognitive and social development. "We were very pleased with the amazing progress she made in preschool," said Monica. "This provided us with the information we needed to push for full inclusion in her kindergarten classroom."

Teachers and child care providers also see growth in children who have had opportunities in typical preschool classrooms and child care settings. "Time spent in inclusive classrooms, whether it is all of a student's time or just a part of their day, has many benefits," said Erin Nelson, a former special education preschool teacher who now works as a technology specialist in PACER's Simon Technology Center. "When children with delays or disabilities spend time with typically developing peers, they are exposed to age-appropriate language, classroom behavior, and social and play skills."

Cindy Croft from the Minnesota Center for Inclusive Child Care says that inclusion benefits all children —

including those without disabilities. "Inclusive child care gives all children, with and without disabilities, the opportunity to learn and play together in a setting where everyone belongs," said Croft. "In a high quality inclusive child care setting, children get to experience how they are all 'more alike than different' in a positive and nurturing environment that promotes social relationships."

Setting High Standards

Madeline made tremendous developmental gains through her inclusive kindergarten classroom, including

learning how to read sight words and speak some basic phrases in Spanish. She also participated fully in her class recital at the end of the year. "She was on-stage doing everything the other kids were doing," said Monica. "It brought a tear to our eyes to see how independent and confident she has gotten."

Monica and her husband are ecstatic about Madeline's progress, but they aren't surprised. "It's so important not to have preconceived ideas

for what your child will achieve and what they won't," said Monica.

As Madeline moves into first grade, Monica is confident that she will continue to be successful. "As a parent, you want your child to live as normal a life as they can," said Monica. "Inclusion makes that possible."

Inclusive child care gives all children, with and without disabilities, the opportunity to learn and play together in a setting where everyone belongs.

-Cindy Croft, Minnesota Center for Inclusive Child Care

Family Fun Day & Tech Expo Sept. 19

Stop by PACER's Simon Technology Center for FREE fun that celebrates how assistive technology can give everyday people super powers! Children with disabilities, their families, individuals, and professionals can participate in hands-on activities with technology, enjoy the live band, and more.

Saturday, September 19

10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

at PACER Center

Pre-registration required at PACER.org/workshops

PACER ANSWERS FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Do you have questions about your young child's early learning? Judy Swett, PACER's early childhood staff advocate, provides helpful answers.

Q: My son is going to kindergarten this fall and the school district wants to place him in a resource room for most of the day. Ryan has been successfully included in a preschool program, and I want him to be in a regular kindergarten classroom. How can I ask the district to change its proposal?

A: You should have received the proposed Individualized Education Program (IEP) for Ryan, including an "LRE (Least Restrictive Environment) Statement" indicating where he will spend his day. You should also have received a "Prior Written Notice" (what the district is proposing and why) and a "Parent Consent/Object" form, which allows you to agree or disagree with the proposed IEP. If you agree with the proposed services, but not the location or length of time outside the regular classroom, you can check the box stating that you agree with some but not all of the proposed IEP. This form has to be returned within 14 calendar days of receiving the IEP. The district must then schedule a "conciliation conference," which is a meeting with you to help iron out the issues.

It helps to have information about how well your child did in the inclusive preschool classroom. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines "least restrictive environment" as an educational setting that

provides an appropriate program, including necessary supports, in as typical a school environment as possible. These decisions are made by the IEP team based on the child's needs, and the IEP has to explain why and when the child will be educated or participate in activities outside of the regular education setting. You could ask these questions:

- Why is this setting being proposed?
- Why can't services be delivered in the regular classroom?
- How will he be included in regular education to the maximum extent?

For more information on how to resolve a disagreement with the school district, visit PACER.org/disputeresolution and download the handout that details your options to resolve at PACER.org/parent/php/php-a25.pdf.

Q: I recently tried to enroll my daughter in a child care program, but was told that they could not accept her because she has an IEP. Can the child care center do this?

A: A child care program cannot reject a child because she has an IEP. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that the program consider the individual needs of



the child and whether or not the program can meet those needs. The center has to make reasonable modifications to its policies and practices to integrate children with disabilities unless the modification would be a financial hardship to the center, the child's presence would pose a direct threat to the health and safety of others, or the modification would require a fundamental alteration of the program.

The Center for Inclusive Child Care (CICC) helps programs include children with disabilities. For more information on available resources, visit inclusivechildcare.org/c_inclusion.cfm or call (651) 603-6279.

Have more questions? Call PACER at (952) 838-9000 and ask to speak with an early childhood advocate.

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY (AT) CAN SUPPORT INCLUSION

Time spent in inclusive classrooms is a great opportunity for children with disabilities to learn and practice new skills, and many are able to participate with minimal support or adaptations. For other children, the right assistive technology (AT) can be the key that enables them to participate fully. From a crayon with a textured grip to help a child color, to high-tech communication devices that help children talk, there is a wide variety of assistive technology available to support young children in inclusive settings. Let's look at a few examples.

Some AT is useful at home and school, such as a visual schedule which can help a student remember what to do for various activities such as the morning routine. Pencil grips increase a child's control while he or she is writing or coloring. A communication board or choice board helps young children express their wants and needs. Here are some specific examples of how AT can help a child throughout his or her school day.

Circle Time

"Circle time" is a key component of a preschooler's day that often includes stories, songs, the calendar, and other activities. A wiggle seat used during this time lets young children move while remaining seated. Others hold a fidget, a small object that keeps little hands busy and helps hold their interest in the activity. Visual rules help pre-readers remember what they are supposed to be doing, and may include pictures of sitting, raising hands, or staying quiet.



Two children sit on wiggle seats that allow them to move while staying seated.



Adapted dishes and silverware, along with a choice board, help a child be more independent while eating.



This motorized bunny is switch-activated to help children with disabilities play independently.

Books are an important part of circle time, too, and there are many adaptations for reading that make books more accessible. Some children use page turners — often called "fluffers" — that are inserted between the pages of a book to make the pages easier to turn. Other children use pictures to match the story, raised lines for students who are blind or have low vision, or tools such as the AnyBook Reader, which allows teachers to record narration or sounds to go along with a story.

Snack Time

Snack time is a great opportunity for young children to try new foods and talk with their friends. Adapted cups, bowls, and utensils allow children with limited motor skills or control to eat more independently. The choice board can be helpful here and the wiggle chair, too.

Play Time

Young children learn through play as they discover how to work with others and learn how to solve problems. Adapted toys, which include switch-activated toys and do-it-yourself adaptations, provide children with the opportunity to use age-appropriate toys in ways that work for them. Whether a child is playing with blocks or cooking in a pretend kitchen, there is simple assistive technology available that can help make it easier for children with disabilities to make comments, ask questions, and interact with other children.

To learn more about assistive technology that can help your child be included, please visit PACER's Simon Technology Center at PACER.org/stc or call (952) 838-9000.

HELP YOUR CHILD HAVE A HAPPY MORNING



Mornings can be challenging for parents of young children as they scramble to get everyone up and out the door. The key to a more comfortable start to the day is a well-planned morning routine. A routine can limit challenging behaviors such as crying, whining, and tantrums, while helping your child learn important skills, develop confidence, and become more independent. Here are some tips to help your family establish a morning routine.

Try This at Home

- Use a visual schedule — Young children can understand your expectations better when you use photos, clipart, or familiar objects to show them. Visit challengingbehavior.org and search for “visual schedules” to learn how to create your own visual schedule.
- Set a consistent bedtime — Your child may have difficulty waking up in the morning because he isn’t getting enough sleep at night. Establishing a set bedtime (and sticking to it!) usually helps children sleep better.
- Plan ahead for the next day — Do things the same way each night before bed. For example, lay out

your child’s clothes and pack her backpack before using the visual schedule to talk about tomorrow’s activities.

- Offer your child choices — When a child has options, he feels a sense of independence that can be very helpful. For example, “First you can get dressed and then you have a choice: Would you like cereal for breakfast or pancakes?”
- Include some bonding time — Your child will feel more calm and comfortable when you take a few minutes to snuggle or read a short story together.
- Offer encouragement — Praise your child when she completes a specific task. For example,

“You got up all by yourself today. That’s wonderful! Now you have time to play with your toys.”

Practice at School

Most teachers understand the importance of a set routine for young children. When students know what they should be doing now, and what’s coming next, they feel less anxious and more enthusiastic about participating. Specific activities may change but the routine does not, and this helps children be more comfortable and more confident.

The Bottom Line

Think of the morning routine as a daily opportunity to build a positive relationship with your child and enable her to practice important skills such as dressing, bathing, and grooming. Start the day with a positive morning routine and you’ll be setting the tone for the entire day.

**This article is adapted from the Backpack Connection Series of tip sheets developed by The Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children (TACSEI). Visit challengingbehavior.org to explore available resources.*

RESOURCES TO SUPPORT YOUR CHILD'S INCLUSION



These resources can provide you with information and support as you consider inclusive settings for your young child. For more information on early childhood resources, call PACER at (952) 838-9000 and ask to speak with a parent advocate.

Definition of Least Restrictive Environment | [PACER.org/parent/php/PHP-c7.pdf](https://www.pacer.org/parent/php/PHP-c7.pdf)

The PACER handout “Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): An English Translation of Key Legal Requirements,” offers a clear definition of “least restrictive environment” as used in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Center for Inclusive Child Care | [inclusivechildcare.org](https://www.inclusivechildcare.org)

The Center for Inclusive Child Care provides resources for parents and child care providers to help children successfully participate in an inclusive child care setting.

EZ AT

PACER’s recently updated “EZ AT” book is a guide to help professionals and parents encourage assistive

technology (AT) use among children ages 3 to 8 who have disabilities. Whether low-tech or high-tech, the activities described in this guide promote learning and inclusion among all students through AT. Call PACER at (952) 838-9000 to order item STC-16, or you can download a copy of the booklet at [PACER.org/stc/pubs/STC-16.pdf](https://www.pacer.org/stc/pubs/STC-16.pdf).

Help Me Grow | [helpmegrowmn.org](https://www.helpmegrowmn.org)

If you have concerns about your child’s growth or development you can contact Help Me Grow and make a referral to Early Intervention or Early Childhood Preschool Special Education. Minnesota’s Early Intervention Services for eligible infants and toddlers are designed to meet the unique developmental needs of each child and their family and are delivered at no cost to families. Preschool Special Education Services for eligible children ages 3 to 5 provide special instruction and related services which are delivered at no cost to families.

A Family Guide to Participating in the Child Outcomes Measurement Process

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has developed three child outcomes to measure the progress of young children. These outcomes are described in this helpful guide, which also includes tips for parents on what information to share with their child’s early intervention providers or early childhood special education teachers. The guide is available for free download at [PACER.org/publications/pdfs/ALL-71.pdf](https://www.pacer.org/publications/pdfs/ALL-71.pdf), and printed copies can also be ordered for \$1.50 each with discounts for larger quantities. Call (952) 838-9000 or (800) 537-2237 and order item ALL-71.

PACER Center | [PACER.org/ec](https://www.pacer.org/ec)

PACER’s Early Childhood Family Information and Resources Project offers individual assistance, workshops, and print and web-based resources for families of children from birth to age 5. The project webpage has numerous resources, publications, and links to organizations and programs that serve families of young children with disabilities, both in Minnesota and nationwide.

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(Alternate format is available upon request.)



CELEBRATE YOUR CHILD ON PACER'S WALL OF CHAMPIONS!

Celebrate your young champions (birth to age 5) by submitting their photos to PACER's "Wall of Champions" on PACER's Facebook page. The photos will be posted with first names only. E-mail photos to Judy Swett, Early Childhood Coordinator, at jswett@PACER.org.