



*It is essential that families are aware their child with special needs has the right to receive care and education in the least restrictive environment along with their age-appropriate peers.*

# Including Young Children with Disabilities in Typical Early Childhood Settings

BY LAUREN AGORATUS, M.A. AND DENISE BOUYER-HARGROVE

**M**any families are unaware that their child with a disability or special need could be included in a typical child care or preschool program. Also, parents may not be aware that their child transitioning from early intervention to preschool has specific rights to receive supported education services in the least restrictive environment.

## CHILD CARE

Families of young children with disabilities and special needs have the same options for child care as all families. There is a variety of child care providers and programs to choose from. There are babysitters, nanny services, family child care (home-based care in private homes), to center-based child care (faith-based centers, head start programs and private child care). Child care can also fall within the category of approved, unapproved, licensed and unlicensed programs. Many family child care, home-based providers are not licensed. All child care providers, including home-based care, must comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA.)

It is important for families of children with disabilities and/or special needs know that research shows that children segregated as young as birth to three, tend to remain so throughout their adult lives (source: NJ Early Intervention System Statement on Natural Environments). Whether or not a child is potty-trained is not a valid reason to exclude a child if diapering is provided for other children. Child care providers can exclude children with special needs if “their presence would pose a direct threat to the health or safety of others.” Child care providers must make “reasonable

modifications” unless “doing so would constitute a ‘fundamental alteration’” of the program (for more details on the ADA, see Resources.)

Higher costs are not a valid reason for excluding children with disabilities from a child care program; these costs should be treated as overhead and divided equally among all paying customers. The only way to determine the appropriate action is to accept the child into the program, and determine which supports are needed for the child. In some states the Map to Inclusive Child Care Project, a project originally funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, created teams in States to help support inclusion; a few are still in existence (see Resources). Otherwise, contact your state’s Parent Training and Information Center for assistance.

## QUESTIONS FAMILIES CAN ASK & SUPPORTS FAMILIES CAN PROVIDE

Parents of children with special needs should shop around for the best fit for their child. Some questions they could ask child care providers are:

- *Are you able to handle my child’s medical needs?*
- *What are your medication policies?*
- *Is the environment safe for my child? (especially important for a child who may wander)*
- *How can I help you to accommodate my child?*

The last question is particularly important as it demonstrates to the child care provider that you will work in partnership with them. Some things that families can do to facilitate this are:



**SOCIAL ADVANCES:** Research shows that children segregated as young as birth to three, tend to remain so throughout their adult lives.

- *Bring the child to the center several times before leaving him/her there to ease the transition*
- *Provide diapering supplies if needed*
- *Provide food/drinks if the child is on a special diet*
- *Connect the center/provider to their child's healthcare provider, therapist, or other service provider who can help them learn how to appropriately serve and make accommodations for the child*
- *Bring the early intervention or preschool special education system together with the childcare provider to work together on behalf of the child with special needs.*

## PRESCHOOL

Often, families of children with disabilities in early intervention are told about “the preschool disabled” programs in their district. Parents may think this is the only choice, or that this automatically would be the best option for their child. They may not know that their child is entitled to a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE.) The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states that first consideration must be given to the setting the child would have attended if he/she did not have a disability. Alternative placement must be as close to

home as possible and only occurs if appropriate supports and services are unsuccessful. This could include individual support from a paraprofessional. (Note: paraprofessionals have higher educational requirements than “aides”.) Families can contact the Parent Training and Information Center in their state to find out what the responsibilities of the school district are as well as their child’s rights. It is important to remember that supports are portable so inclusion should be able to happen anywhere.

Parents of children with disabilities need to know that there are many options for their children. By working with child care providers, early intervention programs, and schools, families can ensure that their child with special needs has access to the best care in the most inclusive environment. •

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

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## INCLUSION IN TYPICAL EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS : RESOURCES



**CENTER FOR PARENT INFORMATION AND RESOURCES**  
[www.parentcenterhub.org/find-your-center](http://www.parentcenterhub.org/find-your-center)



**MAP TO INCLUSIVE CHILD CARE**  
<http://uconncedd.org/completedprojects/inclusive-child-care>



**CHOOSING CHILD CARE: A PARENT’S GUIDE FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**  
[www.state.nj.us/humanservices/clients/family/special/8\\_ParentsGuide.pdf](http://www.state.nj.us/humanservices/clients/family/special/8_ParentsGuide.pdf)



**NJ INCLUSIVE CHILD CARE PROJECT**  
[www.spannj.org/njiccp/index](http://www.spannj.org/njiccp/index)

**THE BASIC REQUIREMENTS OF THE ADA FOR CHILD CARE CENTERS**  
[www.spanadvocacy.org/content/what-are-basic-requirements-ada-child-care-centers](http://www.spanadvocacy.org/content/what-are-basic-requirements-ada-child-care-centers)  
[www.spannj.org/njiccp/include/modules/resources/CommonlyAskedQuestionsAboutChildCareandtheADA.htm](http://www.spannj.org/njiccp/include/modules/resources/CommonlyAskedQuestionsAboutChildCareandtheADA.htm)



**RESEARCH SUPPORTING PRESCHOOL INCLUSION (ECTA SITE)**  
[http://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/topics/inclusion/research/Research\\_Supporting\\_Preschool\\_Inclusion\\_R.pdf](http://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/topics/inclusion/research/Research_Supporting_Preschool_Inclusion_R.pdf)

**US DEPT OF EDUCATION: EARLY CHILDHOOD AND INCLUSION**  
[www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/inclusion/index.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/inclusion/index.html)