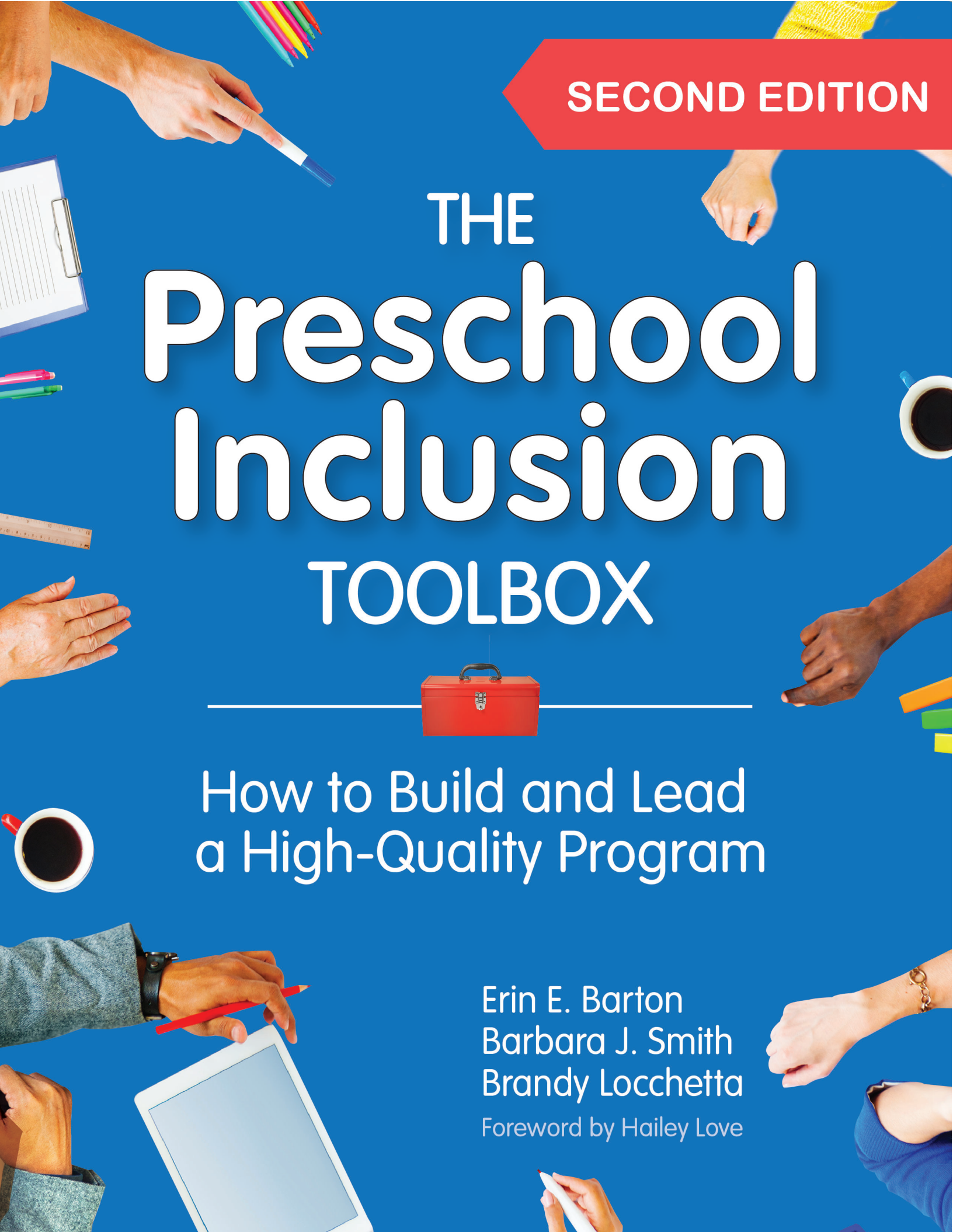


THE Preschool Inclusion TOOLBOX



SECOND EDITION

THE Preschool Inclusion TOOLBOX

How to Build and Lead
a High-Quality Program

Erin E. Barton
Barbara J. Smith
Brandy Locchetta
Foreword by Hailey Love

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The Preschool Inclusion Toolbox

How to Build and Lead a High-Quality Program Second Edition

by

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by Erin E. Barton, Ph.D., BCBA-D, Barbara J. Smith, Ph.D., and Brandy M. Locchetta, Ph.D., BCBA-D.

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About the Downloads

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Introduction



TOOLS FROM THE TOOLBOX

- **Appendix IA** Fact Sheet of Research on Preschool Inclusion
- **Appendix IB** Policy Statement and Individuals With Disabilities Education Act Provisions Supporting Preschool Inclusion
- **Appendix IC** DEC/NAEYC Joint Position Statement on Inclusion
- **Appendix ID** Our Family's Story: Relearning Inclusion Through Love

The purpose of this book, which we refer to as a toolbox, is to provide practical tools to assist school districts in developing program-level policies and procedures that promote preschool inclusion and facilitate necessary changes to public policies. This book can also serve as a resource for graduate students in early childhood special education and early childhood programs. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 (PL 108-446), school districts are required to ensure that children with disabilities, ages 3–21, are educated with their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. IDEA emphasizes the importance of placing young children with disabilities in settings with typically developing peers, a preference reiterated in recent policy statements (see Appendix IB). This toolbox offers a self-directed guide for identifying challenges to preschool inclusion and developing policies and procedures that support the appropriate placement of young children with disabilities alongside children without disabilities for their special education and related services.

The goals of the toolbox are as follows:

1. To describe high-quality preschool inclusion
2. To identify potential challenges to preschool inclusion and outline supportive policies, procedures, and practices
3. To assist school district preschool inclusion teams in developing and implementing action plans for preschool inclusion

4. To suggest strategies for developing and implementing individualized education programs (IEPs) to facilitate high-quality preschool inclusion

The tools in the toolbox include:

- Fact sheets summarizing research and IDEA requirements, as well as other handouts for building awareness and support
- Templates, checklists, and sample materials to aid in creating supportive policies and practices
- Boxes and graphics that summarize common challenges and possible solutions
- “Tips for Success” from professionals who have successfully implemented preschool inclusion
- Reflection questions to encourage critical thinking

For items that are reproducible, please use and disseminate them freely!

WHY THIS TOPIC?

Ensuring that all infants, toddlers, and young children with disabilities have access to high-quality, inclusive early learning environments is essential for upholding their rights and those of their families. Inclusion, as defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division for Early Childhood (DEC), involves supporting every child’s right to participate in diverse activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society, fostering positive social relationships, a sense of belonging, and optimal development. IDEA mandates that children with disabilities be educated alongside their nondisabled peers to the greatest extent possible, with removal only considered when satisfactory education cannot be achieved otherwise. Federal initiatives, including the 2015 and updated 2023 joint policy statements by the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, underscore the commitment to expanding inclusive early learning environments. Research consistently shows that these inclusive settings lead to positive outcomes for young children, highlighting the importance of inclusion as a key priority in policy, professional standards, and practice.

Although definitions of settings and reporting methods have evolved, the comparison between 1985 and current data suggests only minimal increases in providing special education and related services to children with disabilities ages 3–5 in regular early childhood settings. This slow growth is alarming and underscores the need for this book. It is essential to address the discrepancy between research and legislative support for preschool inclusion and the actual practices observed in schools.

The slow progress in expanding preschool inclusion indicates that school districts need more support to understand the developmental importance of inclusive placements for young children with disabilities. They also require effective strategies for designing services, implementing systems, and crafting policies and procedures that fully integrate young children with disabilities into high-quality early childhood settings.

However, inclusion is more than just placing children with disabilities in the same physical space as their peers. It involves creating environments where all children feel a true sense of belonging. This means fostering a community where differences are celebrated and every child’s unique abilities and learning needs are valued. Inclusion ensures that every child has the opportunity to participate meaningfully, build relationships, and develop their identities within a supportive and welcoming community.

RESEARCH

This toolbox is based on extensive research, our professional experiences, and data from recent surveys. Decades of research demonstrate that high-quality early education and developmental services for young children with disabilities significantly improve developmental outcomes. Such services can 1) ameliorate and, in some cases, prevent developmental delays; 2) reduce the likelihood of children being retained in later grades; 3) lower educational costs for school programs; and 4) enhance the quality of relationships among parents, children, and families. Additionally, research shows that high-quality early interventions in inclusive settings benefit all young children, not just those with disabilities. Inclusive environments promote positive outcomes, such as improved social and communication skills and enhanced academic achievement for children both with and without disabilities. Further details on this research are provided in Chapter 1, and a summary can be found in Appendix IA.

Laws Supporting Preschool Inclusion

In addition to research findings on the efficacy of inclusive service delivery for preschoolers with disabilities, special education placement options are driven by the least restrictive environment (LRE) requirement of Part B of IDEA. Multiple laws, including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 and IDEA, support preschool inclusion. Appendix IB provides an IDEA fact sheet that lists the LRE provisions from the regulations in Part B (34 CFR §300). This appendix also includes recent policy statements from the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education, as well as letters from the Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, clarifying that the LRE provisions apply to preschool children with disabilities.

National Professional Organizations Supporting Preschool Inclusion

In 2009, two prominent early childhood organizations, the DEC of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the NAEYC, published a joint statement advocating for preschool inclusion. This statement defines early childhood inclusion in terms of access, participation, and supports, recommending that children be provided access to a range of experiences and the necessary supports to participate fully alongside their typically developing peers. The outcomes of high-quality preschool inclusion include full membership, ongoing friendships, positive relationships, and enhanced development and independence. Inclusion involves not only placing children in general education classrooms but also embodying the values, vision, philosophy, leadership, and commitment to make inclusion a standard practice. One local preschool administrator summed it up during an interview: "Inclusion is simply the way we do things. We wouldn't think of educating children any other way."

The full joint position statement is available online and is included as Appendix IC. It is described in more detail in Chapter 1 and referenced throughout the toolbox.

BOOK OVERVIEW

This toolbox provides readily accessible examples of policies, procedures, and strategies for implementing preschool inclusion. Full-scale implementation of inclusion requires effective policies, professional development, and classroom practices. We recognize that many school district personnel and families are committed to preschool inclusion, and we hope this toolbox provides the resources needed to achieve your preschool inclusion goals.

The first step in expanding preschool inclusion from a capacity-building and systems-change perspective is to establish a team of people to provide expertise and garner support.

In this toolbox, this team is referred to as the preschool inclusion team. The preschool inclusion team will find answers to the following types of questions in this toolbox:

- What is effective inclusion?
- What tools does the preschool inclusion team need to effectively implement quality inclusion?
- How can the preschool inclusion team comply with the law regarding the inclusion of young children with disabilities in regular early childhood programs?
- How can the preschool inclusion team advocate for inclusion with families, stakeholders, and legislators?

The preschool inclusion team focuses on policy, procedure, and system-level outcomes, aiming to create facilitative procedures for preschool inclusion. In contrast, the IEP team focuses on making appropriate inclusive placement decisions for individual children based on the systems and procedures developed by the preschool inclusion team.

Key Terms

- Public policies: Laws, regulations, and other legal requirements enacted by public institutions such as Congress and federal and state departments of education.
- Procedures and program-level policies: Written guidelines and plans that do not carry the weight of laws or regulations. For example, school district procedures or policies might include guidance for delivering professional development or writing agreements with local child care centers to serve as inclusive placements for children with IEPs.
- Preschool children with disabilities: Children ages 3–5 who are eligible for a free appropriate public education (FAPE) under Part B of IDEA.

Format of This Book

This self-guided toolbox contains essential information on high-quality preschool inclusion and effective professional development and practices that support it. Designed for use by a school district's preschool inclusion team, it aims to help create and implement action plans for developing and monitoring policies and procedures within individual programs and agencies. The toolbox is organized into 10 chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of preschool inclusion:

- Chapter 1: High-quality preschool inclusion and its current state in the United States
- Chapter 2: Common challenges and solutions to preschool inclusion
- Chapter 3: Systems and structures for revising and designing policies and procedures to support high-quality preschool inclusion
- Chapter 4: Teaming and collaboration practices, including how to create an effective action plan
- Chapter 5: Effective professional development practices that support inclusion
- Chapter 6: Strategies for financing inclusion, with resources for states and districts
- Chapter 7: Guidance for administrative support for preschool inclusion

- Chapter 8: Common models of inclusion and strategies for supporting different models
- Chapter 9: Making individual placement decisions
- Chapter 10: Summary of next steps to help preschool inclusion teams achieve their goals

A resource list is included to support your inclusion efforts.

Setting the Tone for the Toolbox and for Preschool Inclusion

To set the stage for this book, we share a personal account of inclusion from a parent of a young child with a disability (see Appendix ID). This account provides realistic examples of the challenges families face when seeking inclusion for their children. It also reflects the hopefulness we wish for readers as they begin this important endeavor. We believe that inclusion is for all young children, and with research, laws, and professional organizations supporting it, we are optimistic that inclusion where each and every child feels a true sense of belonging can become a reality.

1

What Is Quality Inclusion?



TOOLS FROM THE TOOLBOX

- **Figure 1.1.** Comparison of a sample of IDEA data.
- **Figure 1.2.** Preschool inclusion framework.
- **Table 1.1.** Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion: Local Program
- **Table 1.2.** Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion: Early Care and Education Environment

The purpose of this section is to provide several important introductory tools for your preschool inclusion toolbox. First, we briefly discuss the state of inclusion in the United States. Then, we discuss our preschool inclusion framework. Finally, as part of our inclusion framework, the empirically supported, effective components of inclusion are presented. As noted in the Introduction, the first step to establishing high-quality preschool inclusion services and systems is to create a preschool inclusion team. Chapter 4 describes specific strategies and logistics for ensuring the preschool inclusion team is focused and effective. One of the first things the team will do is to review the data and research on preschool inclusion. This section will be helpful in that initial phase of work.

THE STATE OF PRESCHOOL INCLUSION IN THE UNITED STATES

As shown in Figure 1.1, a comparison of a sample of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) data over the years indicates that the practice of providing special education and related services to children aged 3–5 years old in regular early childhood settings has not significantly changed.

For example, the data on the percentage of children served under IDEA who attend their regular education program for at least 10 hours per week showed a steady increase prior to 2020 (and the global COVID-19 pandemic) and then a slight decline. According to the 2021 IDEA Section 618 data (from the 45th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA, published in 2023), 48.4% of children receiving services under IDEA attended a regular education program for at least 10 hours per week (from the 44th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA, published in 2022). This represents a slight increase from 2020,

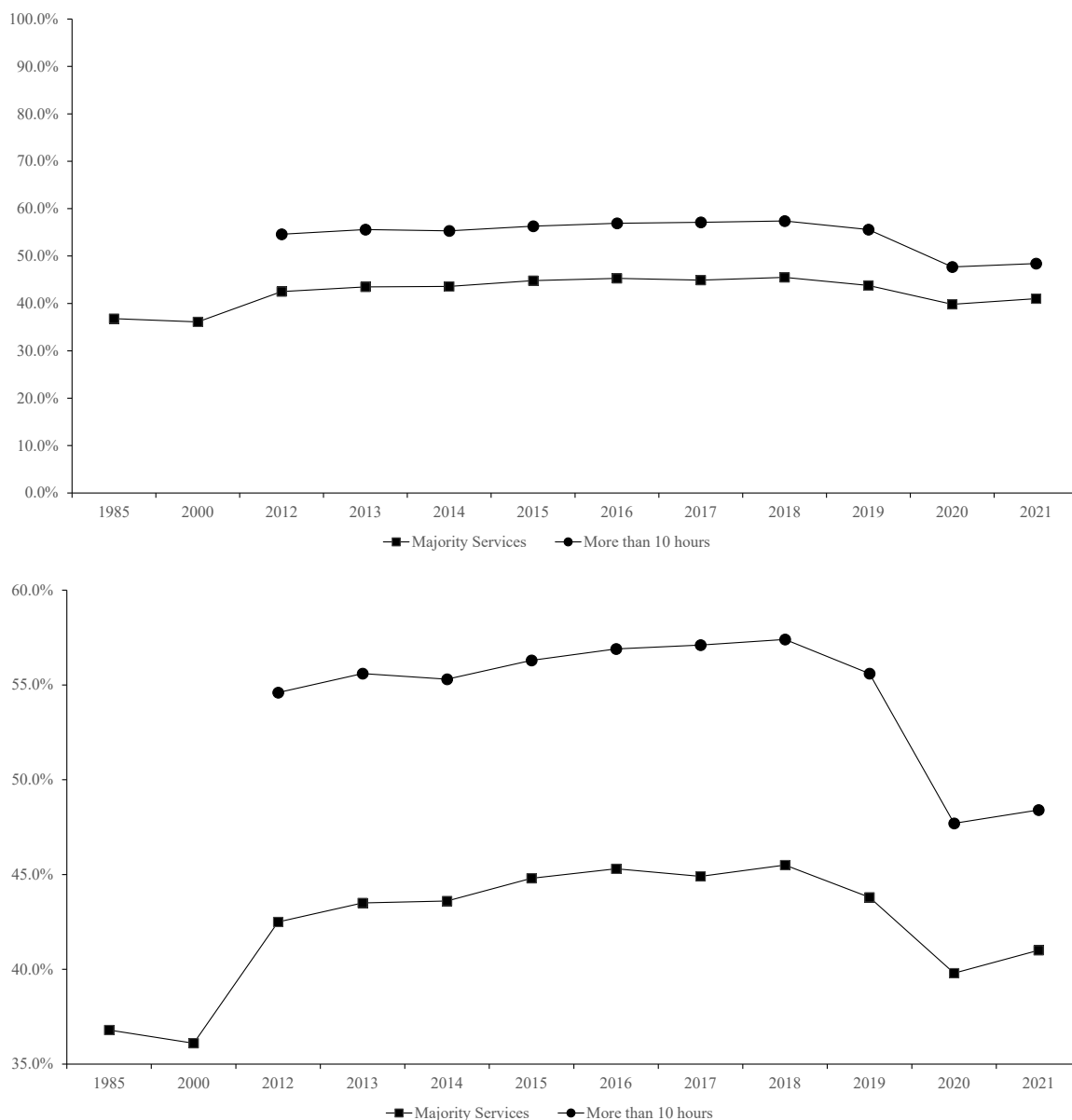


Figure 1.1. Comparison of a sample of IDEA data.

in which 47.6% of children receiving services under IDEA attended a regular education program for at least 10 hours per week. However, this percentage was 54.6% in 2012 (U.S. Department of Education [ED], 2014), showing variability over the years but little to no progress overall. Similarly, the percentage of children receiving the majority of their services in the regular education classroom was 41% in 2021, 39.7% in 2020, and 42.5% in 2012. Although the reporting requirements have changed, the most comparable data suggest these percentages were 36.1% in 2000 and 36.8% in 1985 (U.S. ED, 1987, 2002). This highlights the minimal progress toward preschool inclusion regarding the number of hours and the primary location of services for children with individualized education programs (IEPs) since the passage of PL 99-457, which mandated special education services for children aged 3–5 years old.

The limited improvement from over the previous decades suggests administrators and state teams need support for designing services, implementing systems, and crafting policies that support the inclusion of young children with disabilities into quality early childhood settings.

EMPIRICAL AND LEGAL SUPPORT FOR PRESCHOOL INCLUSION

Research consistently demonstrates that high-quality and responsive environments are associated with positive outcomes for young children, including those with disabilities (Pianta et al., 2009). High-quality inclusive classrooms are linked to positive outcomes for children both with and without disabilities (Barton & Smith, 2015; Boyd et al., 2014). Preschool inclusion has been central to policy, professional standards, and research for decades (DHHS & ED, 2015). IDEA, along with other federal and state policies in early childhood education (e.g., Head Start; DHHS & ED, 2015), has promoted the delivery of educational services for children with disabilities in settings where services are provided to typically developing children for over 30 years. Recent data continue to support these findings, emphasizing the ongoing need for inclusive practices in early childhood education (DHHS & ED, 2023).

The legal foundation for inclusion in early childhood programs is supported by several key federal statutes, including IDEA, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Head Start Act, and the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act. These laws emphasize the importance of providing equal opportunities and full participation for children with disabilities in natural and inclusive settings, starting from birth through early childhood education. IDEA, in particular, mandates that eligible children receive services in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) to the maximum extent appropriate, promoting inclusion in general education settings with appropriate support. The ADA also prohibits discrimination based on disability, ensuring that children with disabilities have an equal opportunity to participate in child care and educational programs. These legal provisions underscore the significance of inclusion for the developmental, educational, and social benefits it offers to children with disabilities.



Tips for Success!

Stay updated with current research! Regularly review the latest studies on early childhood inclusion to ensure your practices are evidence based and effective. Research can offer new insights and innovative strategies that can enhance your inclusion efforts.

U.S. DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATION AND HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES POLICY STATEMENT ON THE INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS (2023, 2015)

Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children With Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs (2023): <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ecd/policy-statement-on-inclusion.pdf>

Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children With Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs (2015): <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/joint-statement-full-text.pdf>

The initial policy statement, jointly issued by the U.S. ED and DHHS, outlined a vision and recommendations for increasing the inclusion of infants, toddlers, and preschool children with disabilities in high-quality early childhood programs. The core idea was that all young

children with disabilities should have access to inclusive early childhood programs, where they receive individualized support and meet high expectations. The statement emphasized the importance of inclusion from an early age, highlighting the legal foundations, scientific basis, and benefits of inclusion.

The statement discussed the legal framework supporting inclusion, citing laws like ADA and IDEA, which require equal educational opportunities for children with disabilities and emphasize the importance of inclusive settings. It identified several challenges to inclusion, including attitudes, interpretation of IDEA requirements, staffing and training issues, lack of comprehensive services, and limited commitment to building partnerships.

To address these challenges, the statement called for a nationwide culture of inclusion, where communities, families, educators, leaders, and advocates come together to celebrate diversity and promote inclusion. It highlighted the need for inclusive strategic plans at various levels and a shared responsibility for making inclusion a top priority. The policy statement underscored the importance of access, participation, and support in early childhood systems, setting the stage for providing inclusive high-quality early learning opportunities for all children.

The recommendations for state action encompassed a comprehensive approach to promoting inclusive early childhood education. First, states are advised to establish a State-Level Interagency Taskforce and Plan for Inclusion, bringing together various stakeholders, including representatives from education, health care, child care, and family support organizations, to create a unified vision for inclusion in early childhood programs. This taskforce should coordinate efforts, prioritize inclusion, and ensure resources and expectations are in place to support local communities.

Furthermore, states were encouraged to adapt their policies to support high-quality inclusion. This involves considering policies that promote comprehensive services, eliminating unnecessary transitions for children in multiple programs, and ensuring that children with disabilities do not have to choose between intervention services and their existing early childhood program. Additionally, states should review and modify their resource allocations to better support inclusive early childhood programs, including leveraging various funding sources and encouraging the use of Title II teacher development funds. Moreover, it is essential for states to strengthen accountability, build incentive structures for inclusive practices, and develop a coordinated early childhood professional development system.

Finally, states were urged to focus on children's social-emotional and behavioral health, raising public awareness about the benefits of early childhood inclusion and collaborating with various community leaders and organizations to promote inclusive practices. These recommendations collectively aimed to create a more inclusive and supportive early childhood education system, ensuring that all children have equal access to high-quality learning opportunities.

The updated 2023 policy statement on the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood programs, released by the ED and DHHS, emphasized a renewed commitment to breaking down barriers for young children with disabilities. This policy built upon the 2015 statement and underscores the urgency in improving services for children with disabilities. It reiterated the expectation that all young children with disabilities should have access to high-quality, inclusive early childhood programs that provide individualized and appropriate support. The statement included updated recommendations for state and local agencies implementing IDEA programs, Head Start, child care, home visiting, preschool, and public schools. It also highlighted evidence-based models, specific solutions and promising practices from several states, and resources to support high-quality individualized programming and inclusion. The overarching goal is to ensure that children with disabilities can fully participate in inclusive early learning opportunities, setting the stage for continued inclusion through their school years and beyond.

The updated 2023 policy statement highlighted several key recommendations and insights aimed at improving access and participation for these children. The policy, jointly released by the U.S. ED and DHHS, emphasized the need for high-quality, inclusive early childhood programs that provide individualized and appropriate support.

1. **Science-Based Benefits and Legal Foundation:** The policy underscores the scientific evidence supporting the benefits of inclusive environments for children with disabilities and reaffirms the legal foundations established by IDEA and other federal policies.
2. **Recommendations for State and Local Policies:** It provides specific recommendations for state and local agencies to strengthen inclusion, including:
 - Developing and implementing policies that promote inclusion in all early childhood settings
 - Ensuring that funding mechanisms support inclusive practices
 - Providing professional development and technical assistance to early childhood educators to enhance their ability to support children with disabilities
 - Aligning with Section 504 to ensure nondiscrimination against children with disabilities during disciplinary actions
3. **Evidence-Based Models and Exemplars:** The statement includes examples of effective inclusive practices and models from various states, showcasing how high-quality individualized programming can be implemented successfully.
4. **Supporting Equity and Resiliency:** Emphasizing equity, the policy advocates for the removal of barriers that prevent children with disabilities from accessing inclusive early learning opportunities. It also highlights the importance of building resilient systems that can adapt to the needs of all children.
5. **Interagency Collaboration:** The policy calls for increased collaboration between different government levels and early childhood systems to ensure cohesive and comprehensive support for children with disabilities and their families.



Tips for Success!

Use the policy statements!

Use the joint policy statements to guide your inclusion efforts!

They have clear recommendations and a compilation of references and resources focused on supporting pre-school inclusion.

These updates reflect a renewed commitment to inclusivity, aiming to set high expectations and provide the necessary support for children with disabilities to thrive in early childhood programs and beyond.

DEC/NAEYC POSITION STATEMENT ON INCLUSION

Two prominent early childhood professional associations, the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), jointly developed and published a statement advocating for and supporting interdisciplinary, inclusive early care and education for all young children. The focus on cross-sector collaboration

provides new opportunities at the state and local levels to engage in meaningful dialogue around critical issues for children with disabilities within the broader early childhood systems (Woods & Snyder, 2012). This is especially important given the fragmented nature of the

**APPLICATION QUESTION:**

You can find state-specific information about preschool inclusion and IDEA at ideadata.org. What is the percentage of children with disabilities spending 80% or more of their time in inclusive settings in your state? Are you surprised with what you found? Discuss these questions with your preschool inclusion team.

early childhood intervention and education system and the need to ensure quality inclusion for young children with disabilities (Buysse & Hollingsworth, 2009; Odom et al., 2011). The diverse early childhood systems (e.g., Head Start, child care, public school) need to work together to ensure sufficient supports for children with disabilities, their families, *and* the practitioners who work with them Odom et al., 2013).

The full DEC position statements can be found at <http://www.dec-sped.org/papers>.

The DEC/NAEYC position statement defines early childhood inclusion and identifies the relevant features and recommendations for developing quality inclusive preschool programs. Their definition of inclusion is as follows (DEC/NAEYC, 2009, p. 2):

Early childhood inclusion embodies 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. The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential. The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and supports.

The three defining features of inclusion according to DEC and NAEYC are **access**, **participation**, and **support**. **Access** refers to providing an adequate range of contextually relevant learning opportunities, activities, and settings for every child by enhancing physical accessibility, identifying and eradicating physical or structural barriers, and offering multiple and varied learning opportunities. The goal is to ensure that all children have access to effective learning environments; typical routines, activities, and settings; and general education curricula. **Participation** means that there is a focus on ensuring all children are active, independent participants in their families, classrooms, and communities. This means adults promote learning and engagement by using a range of instructional practices from embedded to more explicit to ensure all children have opportunities to engage, participate, and learn across all domains. Adults use individualized accommodations, modifications, and adaptations to promote the active participation and a sense of belonging for all children in the typical settings and learning environments. Participation should be driven by the needs of the individual child and their family. **Supports** refers to broader, infrastructure-level support to the administrators, teachers, staff, and so on, in providing effective quality programs. This means programs should ensure all adults involved have access to quality professional development, effective ongoing follow-up assistance, and support for collaborative teaming. Supports also refers to having effective policies in place that promote and incentivize quality preschool inclusion. See Figure 1.2 for a visual representation of the three defining features of inclusion: access, participation, and supports. It's important to note that IDEA has a similar concept to ensure participation and success in the regular education setting. These provisions are "supplementary aids and services" (34 CFR 300.42) and "technical assistance and training activities" (34 CFR 300.119). These provisions are on the IDEA fact sheet in the Introduction of this book.

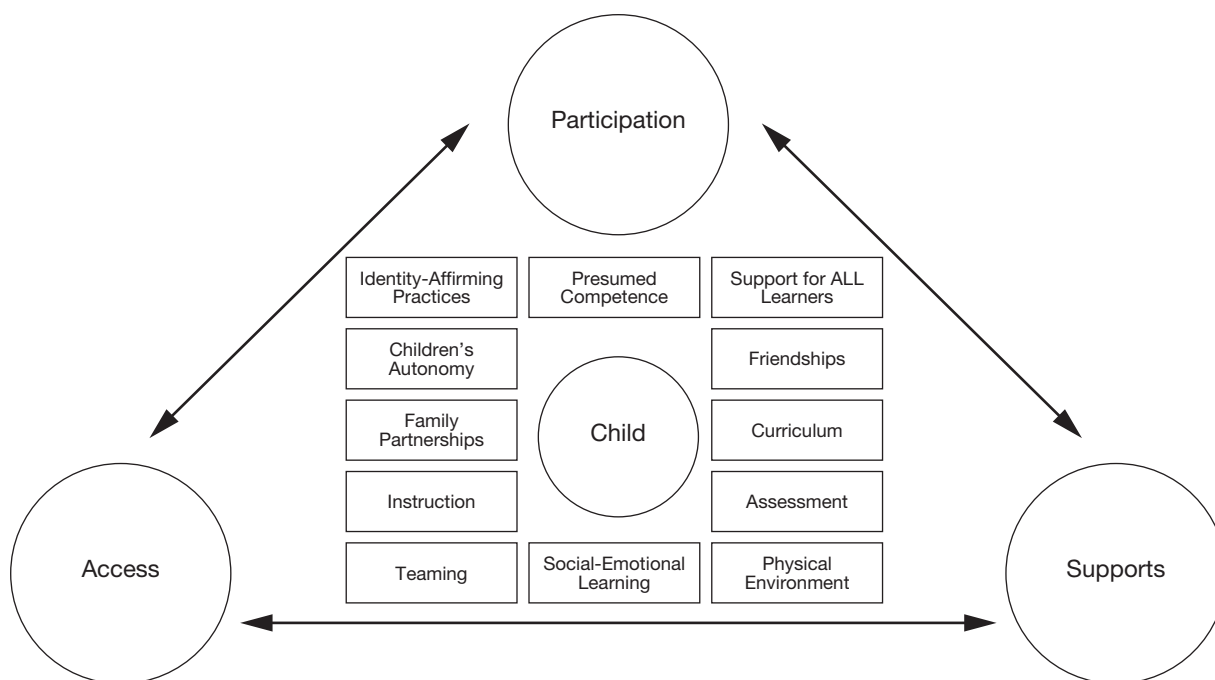


Figure 1.2. Preschool inclusion framework.



APPLICATION QUESTION:

What is your impression of the information presented in the DEC/NAEYC joint position statement? Who would benefit from knowing this information? How will you distribute and use this document? How will you guide discussions about preschool inclusion using this document?

EARLY CHILDHOOD TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER: INDICATORS OF HIGH-QUALITY INCLUSION

The Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA) developed a comprehensive set of Inclusion Indicators to address the evolving requirements of the early childhood education system, created with input from various national partners. These indicators are intended to build capacity at every level—state, community, local programs, and care environments—in implementing inclusive practices and identifying challenges to inclusion. They were intentionally created to guide coaching and implementation and integrate inclusive practices across different early childhood education contexts. The four sets include state, community, local program, and early care and education

(classroom) indicators. The quality classroom indicators serve as guiding principles and practical tools. These indicators help educators and administrators weave inclusion seamlessly into the fabric of preschool education. Let's explore these indicators, which are the building blocks of an inclusive learning environment. Tables 1.1 and 1.2 list the indicators with examples for local programs and classrooms, respectively. These tables can be used with your teams to plan implementation and as a coaching tool to support teachers.

The specific indicators can be found here: <https://ectacenter.org/topics/inclusion/indicators.asp>.

Table 1.1. Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion: Local Program

| No. | Indicator/Element | Summary (review specific examples here: https://ectacenter.org/topics/inclusion/indicators-local.asp) | Notes for Your Program | Create Action Plan Item? |
|-----|--|--|------------------------|--------------------------|
| L1 | Inclusion Leadership Teams | The program establishes an Inclusion Leadership Team. | | |
| L2 | Shared Purpose | The program creates and enacts a collective purpose statement that recognizes and celebrates the unique contributions of every child. | | |
| L3 | Family Engagement and Partners | The program guarantees that families of children both with and without disabilities are involved in creating and implementing policies and initiatives related to inclusion. | | |
| L4 | Awareness and Commitment | The program has clear guidelines for inclusion that actively foster awareness and commitment to inclusion among providers, families, and the community. | | |
| L5 | Policies and Procedures | The program creates and enforces written inclusion policies and procedures that align with its shared purpose statement and promote the use of inclusive practices. | | |
| L6 | Fiscal Resources | The program comprehends the available funding streams and resources, reallocating, coordinating, and integrating these funds to design and implement inclusive practices. | | |
| L7 | Staff Policies and Structure | The program's policies and structures facilitate the delivery of early intervention, special education, and other specialized services (such as speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, or physical therapy) within daily routines and activities. | | |
| L8 | Collaborative Teaming | The program allocates sufficient planning time and other supports for collaborative teams to work together consistently, aiming to enhance the learning and development of children with disabilities. | | |
| L9 | Specialized Technical Assistance (TA) | The program identifies and utilizes specialized TA and consultative services to support the implementation of inclusive practices and communicates any additional support needs to the state. | | |
| L10 | Program Supports for Professional Development (PD) | The program enhances providers' confidence and competence in implementing inclusive practices by offering opportunities and support for PD and coaching that promote equity. | | |
| L11 | Curriculum | The program effectively employs a developmentally appropriate curriculum, adapting it as necessary to provide children with disabilities inclusive experiences that promote their learning, agency, and socialization. | | |
| L12 | Data Collection and Use | The program utilizes disaggregated data (e.g., race and ethnicity, language, ability, gender, income, and geographic region), along with ongoing observation and authentic assessment, to inform decisions and enhance the quality of the environment, inclusive practices, and child experiences. | | |

Table 1.2. Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion: Early Care and Education Environment

| No. | Indicator/Element | Summary (review specific examples here https://ectacenter.org/topics/inclusion/indicators-ece.asp) | Notes for Your Classroom or for Coaching | Create Action Plan Item? |
|-----|---|---|--|--------------------------|
| E1 | Physical Environment | Providers modify the learning space and resources to enable children with disabilities to fully engage, learn, play, and interact with others. | | |
| E2 | Children's Autonomy and Child-Centered Approaches | Providers ensure that children with disabilities are encouraged and assisted in participating in activities they enjoy and that are important to their families. The emphasis is on facilitating access, participation, and a sense of belonging, rather than trying to fix or change the child. | | |
| E3 | | Providers build genuine, trusting, and culturally responsive relationships with families, engaging in daily communication about the child's progress and celebrating achievements frequently. Families are given diverse opportunities to provide input on their child's learning and support needs, with their goals being prioritized. | | |
| E4 | Social-Emotional Learning and Development | Providers cultivate positive, nurturing, emotionally supportive, and culturally responsive relationships with children. This is especially crucial when there are differences in race, gender, income, language, religion, or family structure between providers, children, and their families. | | |
| E5 | Meaningful Interactions With Peers | Providers use diverse strategies to encourage positive social interactions among children. This includes arranging the environment to teach specific social skills that foster peer interactions with multiple exchanges and increasing complexity. | | |
| E6 | Curriculum | Providers create, adapt, and implement teaching plans across all developmental domains to maximize the engagement of children with disabilities in various activities and routines. These plans incorporate the use of specialized equipment and assistive technology. | | |
| E7 | Instruction | Providers use child-led, culturally responsive and sustaining, embedded, evidence-based, and data-driven instruction during natural routines. Group activities and play offer children with disabilities ample opportunities to learn skills deemed important by the team, including the family. Instructional supports are tailored and effective. | | |
| E8 | Supporting Dual Language Learners With Disabilities | Dual language learners (DLL), who are learning two or more languages simultaneously, receive assessments and services in both their home language and English if they are bilingual. When providers who speak the home language are unavailable, interpreters or community members are utilized to communicate with families, administer screeners and assessments, adapt materials, and deliver instruction that incorporates the home language. | | |

Table 1.2. Continued

| No. | Indicator/Element | Summary (review specific examples here https://ectacenter.org/topics/inclusion/indicators-ecce.asp) | Notes for Your Classroom or for Coaching | Create Action Plan Item? |
|-----|---|--|--|--------------------------|
| E9 | Collaborative Teaming | Providers demonstrate flexibility, coachability, and ethical behavior with all team members. The team strives to understand each other's roles and skills, using common language to achieve shared goals. They gather and share information, review data, plan, implement, and embed instructional supports and adaptations for each child within natural routines. | | |
| E10 | Assessment | Providers use continuous observation and authentic assessment practices across all developmental areas. These practices are culturally responsive, bias-conscious, and delivered in both the child's home language and English, as appropriate. This approach helps to identify the child's strengths and areas for growth, learning, and development. Data on each child's learning are monitored and used to guide the implementation of adaptations or additional supports. | | |
| E11 | Antibias, Culturally Responsive, Sustaining, and Identity-Affirming Practices | Providers recognize the impact of implicit and explicit biases on their teaching. Consequently, they offer learning experiences that align with the child's and family's backgrounds, valuing and respecting all lived experiences. Providers ensure that learning opportunities and materials positively represent diverse cultures and identities, avoiding a colorblind or ability-evasive approach. | | |

INCLUSION FRAMEWORK

Our framework for this textbook builds upon the 2023 policy statement on inclusion in early childhood programs and the ECTA's indicators for quality inclusion. IDEA data on inclusion show that children with disabilities receive care in a variety of settings, including schools, child care centers, Head Start programs, and family child care environments. However, families often encounter difficulties in securing consistent, appropriate, and high-quality care for their children with disabilities, leading to a reliance on fragmented, inequitable, and low-quality services. This book aims to support school districts in establishing two essential components of quality inclusion: 1) quality environments and 2) effective, ongoing professional development. Importantly, inclusion in preschool education is not an additional task or a separate program; it should permeate every aspect of early childhood education. Inclusion transcends being merely a practice; it is a core value that informs and guides every initiative, decision, and goal within the preschool environment. This framework serves as the foundation for the organization and content of this book, ensuring that inclusive practices are embedded throughout the educational experience.

To fully comprehend the concept of inclusion, it is essential to acknowledge that it extends beyond merely having children with diverse abilities, backgrounds, and needs in the same classroom. Quality inclusion transcends the physical environment and placement, focusing instead on creating an atmosphere where each child is genuinely valued and their unique contributions are recognized and appreciated. At its core, inclusion is founded on the principle that all children, irrespective of their differences, possess an inherent right to be part of a nurturing

and enriching educational community with an intentional focus on ensuring everyone knows they belong. Central to this approach is the concept of **presumed competence**, which posits that all children have the potential to learn and participate meaningfully, given appropriate support and opportunities. Presumed competence challenges educators to view every child as capable and to create learning environments that reflect this belief. Additionally, although this book focuses on supporting Local Education Agencies (LEAs), partnering with the community is also a crucial value. Collaboration with community partners enhances the inclusive efforts of LEAs, providing a more holistic and supportive network for children with disabilities and their families. By adopting presumed competence and fostering inclusive practices, we can ensure that all children are given the opportunity to thrive within a truly inclusive educational community. This framework guides the organization and content of this book.

Case Study: The Maceo Family

The following case study will be woven throughout this Toolbox to illustrate the use of the tools to support quality preschool inclusion. In this excerpt, the Maceo family and their son Raphael are introduced.

The Maceo family currently has a son in third grade, Paul, who is enrolled in their neighborhood elementary school. They are requesting that their younger child, Raphael, who is eligible for special education services, be enrolled in the preschool program at Paul's elementary school. Raphael has been receiving early intervention services in the Maceo family's home since he was 18 months old and was identified as being autistic at 30 months. He expresses himself using gestures and some words, enjoys playing independently with Legos and small figures, and is continuing to build skills for engaging with others socially. The preschool inclusion team at the school reviewed the research on inclusion to identify if there was empirical support for including children like Raphael in regular early childhood settings.

Does research support preschool inclusion? What research would you bring to the team?

The team then reviewed the Local Program Indicators created by ECTA, the information provided in Table 1.1, and the reflection questions at the end of this chapter. The team engaged in a number of information-gathering activities (e.g., classroom observations, informal interviews with teachers and school staff, talking with families) to use the information in the table and create a plan for their overall implementation of preschool inclusion.

These are important first steps in moving toward quality preschool inclusion. What did the preschool inclusion team find?

PROPOSED NEXT STEPS

Incorporating preschool inclusion into an early childhood education program is critical to ensure that all children, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, have access to quality education. Here are some next steps to get started with preschool inclusion while you use this toolbox:

1. **Understand Inclusion Principles:** Familiarize yourself with the principles of inclusion in education. Understand the legal requirements and ethical considerations involved in providing an inclusive environment for all children.
2. **Assessment and Planning:** Conduct a thorough assessment of your preschool's current practices, policies, and physical environment to identify areas that need improvement

to support inclusion. Use the indicators discussed above. Develop an inclusion plan that outlines your goals, strategies, and timelines. Include input from teachers, parents, and specialists who can provide insights into the specific needs of children with disabilities.

3. Professional Development: Plan professional development, including ongoing coaching, based on the needs of your staff.
4. Collaboration: Plan for intentional collaborations with families and stakeholders.
5. Parent Involvement: Involve parents in the inclusion process. Regular communication with parents and caregivers is crucial for understanding the needs of individual children and ensuring a consistent approach at home and in school.
6. Physical Environment and Materials: Ensure that the physical environment is accessible and inclusive. This may involve making modifications such as ramps, wider doorways, and adaptive furniture. Provide a variety of learning materials that cater to diverse learning styles and abilities.
7. IEPs: Develop and implement IEPs for children with disabilities. These plans outline specific goals, strategies, and accommodations to support their learning and development.
8. Data Collection and Progress Monitoring: Implement a system for collecting data on the progress of all children, including those with disabilities. Use these data to make informed decisions about instructional strategies and interventions. Continuously assess and evaluate your inclusion program's effectiveness. Make adjustments and improvements based on feedback from teachers, parents, and specialists.
9. Legal Compliance: Stay informed about local, state, and federal laws and regulations related to inclusive education. Ensure that your program is in compliance with these laws.
10. Advocacy and Community Engagement: Advocate for inclusion within your community and network with other educators and organizations committed to inclusive practices.

Inclusion is not a one-time goal but an ongoing process that takes commitment, patience, and strong collaboration among everyone involved. Creating a welcoming, supportive environment is essential to ensure that each and every child has the opportunity to thrive and reach their full potential. The next several sections will provide the tools your team needs to get started on the important and exciting path to quality preschool inclusion for **ALL** children!

TOOLBOX REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What percentage of U.S. preschoolers with disabilities receive the majority of their services in regular early childhood programs?
2. What empirical research exists to support preschool inclusion?
3. What did you learn from reading the 2023 Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children With Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs?
 - a. How will you use what you learned? What are your specific action steps?
 - b. How will you share what you learned?
4. How will you share information regarding quality preschool inclusion, such as the fact sheets in this book, with others? With whom is it important to share this information?

5. Who will you inform about your increasing understanding of the state of preschool inclusion in your program?
6. What are the three defining features of inclusion per the DEC/NAEYC position statement on inclusion?
7. How well does your program implement preschool inclusion? What is the current percentage of children receiving their special education and related services in regular early childhood programs?
8. What actions do you need to take after considering the ECTA's indicators and elements of high-quality preschool inclusion?

“Grounded in the principles of IDEA, [this book] provides evidence-based strategies and reflective questions that empower early childhood educators to embrace diversity, support all learners, and implement high-quality inclusive practices.”

—Serra Acar, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of Massachusetts Boston

Early childhood inclusion is a national priority—but how can preschool programs step up the progress of inclusion and ensure that all young children learn and grow together?

Big-picture change is the answer, and this second edition of a trusted bestseller offers programs, communities, and states a clear path forward.

Written by top inclusion experts, this comprehensive resource will help readers develop program-level policies for implementing and sustaining full-scale preschool inclusion. School leaders and administrators will learn how to overcome challenges to high-quality inclusion, establish a strong collaborative team, create a solid action plan for building an inclusive program, and monitor how well the plan works. This how-to guide also includes a wealth of practical tools and resources for creating supportive policies, procedures, and practices.

Great for use as a self-directed professional learning resource or as a textbook in early childhood administration courses, this toolbox of ready-to-use guidance will help program leaders promote access, participation, and belonging for all young children.

WHAT'S NEW

- Increased focus on equity
- More guidelines and materials on coaching for preschool inclusion
- New and expanded chapters on identifying program challenges, creating new policies and procedures, establishing professional development systems, and using evidence-based practices
- Updates on current policy statements and challenges related to inclusion
- New examples of implementation strategies
- Updated practical tools for supporting preschool inclusion teams
- Resources on facilitating an action plan for a successful inclusive program

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