Including All Children

by Sharon Hope Irwin

Since the 1970s, child care programs across Canada have begun to include children with special needs. "Inclusion," as we now call it, is a significant departure from earlier beliefs and practices that were based on assumptions that children with special needs were best served in segregated settings.

Unlike the United States where federal policy has made free and appropriate education for children (ages three to 21) with disabilities an entitlement, and where legislation makes it illegal for any child care program or service to exclude on the basis of disability, inclusion in Canadian child care remains voluntary. Most provinces have supported it at some level, through funding, consultation and/or resources, but none have required it.

Best estimates suggest that in 1996 most Canadian child care centres include some children with special needs, some of the time. Generally speaking, though, this inclusion is on an ad hoc basis -- responding on a child-by-child basis, admitting or excluding a particular child depending on the resources and skills currently available to that centre. Thus, one centre might include children with mental challenges, while another might include children with physical disabilities. As centres gain skills at including children with one type or level of disability, they often move further -- expanding the range (e.g., from mental challenges to physical) or the level (e.g., from mild to moderate). These experiences are so predictable that they almost qualify as "developmental stages on the road to inclusion."

"Inclusion," however, goes beyond these child-by-child arrangements. In principle, it means that children should not only be able to attend the same programs they would attend if they did not have special needs, they should also be welcomed, so that their parents are encouraged to apply.

Canadian child care has much to be proud of as it reviews its voluntary move toward including all children. Funding, training and resourcing have often followed -- not preceded -- decisions to include children with special needs. But as cutbacks of subsidies, grants, salary enhancements and resource supports continue, we will be further challenged to uphold the rights of children with special needs to be included in child care. Without legislation or regulatory support that calls on child care centres to include

What Are the Principles of Inclusion?

- **Zero reject:** No child is ever excluded for reasons of level or type of disability.

- **Naturally occurring proportions:** Program includes children with disabilities roughly in proportion to their occurrence in the general population.

- **Some range of options:** Children with special needs are never limited to shorter child care days or excluded from home-based or school-age care.

- **Full participation:** Necessary supports are provided, so that all children can participate in some way in all activities.

- **Advocacy, proaction, parent involvement:** Program actively promotes legislative and policy
children who need extra support, it is easy to fall back into old ways, finding barriers rather than creating opportunities. We've come too far in our understanding and experience of how inclusion benefits everybody to turn back when the going gets rough.

Sharon Hope Irwin is the Director of SpeciaLink, the National Child Care Inclusion Network. For the past nine years, through research, resource and advocacy, SpeciaLink has helped expand opportunities for inclusion in child care, recreation, education and other community settings for young children with special needs and their families. SpeciaLink produces technical assistance as well as newsletters, fact sheets, books and videos related to inclusive child care to the field. For more information, contact SpeciaLink, the National Inclusion Network, P.O. Box 775, Sydney, Nova Scotia, B1P 6G9. Phone (902) 562-1662 or 1-800-840-LINK; fax (902) 539-9117; e-mail speclink@atcon.com; internet http://www.cbnet.ns.ca/~specialink

References


Recommended Resources

Mainstreaming Preschoolers: Children with.... (1978). Project Head Start, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This is a series of eight disability-specific books on children with handicaps (emotional disturbance; health impairments; hearing impairment; mental retardation; physical handicaps; speech and language impairments; and visual handicaps) written for Head Start, day care, nursery school and other preschool staff and parents of children with special needs. Some of the language is dated, but the series is still an excellent resource for front-line child care staff. Even though the books are out of print, you can order a photocopied copy ($25) through SpeciaLink (see above address).

Focus on Special Needs

- Including a Child with a Developmental Delay: Parents and Staff Work Together by Donna Michal
- Special Health Care for Child Care Settings: Minimize the Risks by Trudy Norton
- Interventions for Children with Challenging Behaviours and Special Needs by Lynda Orr and Gerald Cavallaro
- Play and Relationships: Programming for Inclusion by Anne Carr
- Physical Challenges in Child Care: Let the Children Lead by Sister Ginger Patchen

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