

What Inclusion Means for My Preschool Child with a Disability

What is Inclusion?

Inclusion is the concept of educating children with disabilities alongside their peers without disabilities in a regular education classroom environment. According to a 2015 joint policy statement from the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, all young children with disabilities should have access to inclusive high-quality education programs that provide them with individualized and appropriate support in meeting high expectations.

Research has shown that young children with disabilities who are served in inclusive, high-quality preschool programs benefit academically and socially. By being in a regular preschool classroom, young children with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum that sets high standards for all children. They also benefit from interacting with typically developing peers who can model appropriate social and behavioral skills.

Inclusion, least restrictive environment (LRE), and placement

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) does not specifically mention inclusion but does include the concept of least restrictive environment (LRE). LRE is a requirement that students with disabilities, including those in preschool, should be educated alongside with their peers without disabilities to the fullest extent possible. The LRE for each child is determined by the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team based on the child's individual needs and where they are most likely to make progress in the preschool curriculum and on their IEP goals.

Part of the special education process is the determination of a placement for a child. This discussion should happen after the IEP team, which includes the parents, has written goals and objectives and agreed on the services that the child will need to accomplish them. Inclusion in the regular education classroom is the first placement choice the IEP team must consider. Even in preschool, it is important that the IEP team talks about the preschool the child would attend if he or she did not have a disability. This might include Head Start, another community preschool, or a childcare program in which your child is already enrolled.

As part of the placement decision, the IEP team must consider what extra supports or supplementary aids and services are needed for the child to be successful in a regular education classroom environment. This may include assistive technology, special behavior strategies, use of a resource room, or changes in the curriculum and assignments.

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A regular preschool environment is not the appropriate setting for all young children with disabilities. The placement discussion should include information about the range of placement alternatives that are available so the IEP team can decide together what is most appropriate to meet the child's needs in the least restrictive environment. If the IEP team agrees that the child could not make progress in a typical preschool program, then the discussion moves to other possible setting alternatives. If the IEP team determines that a child with disabilities needs to be educated only with other children with disabilities for some or all of the school day, the school must provide an explanation in the IEP. The explanation will include why the child's disabilities are such that the child must be removed from general education to receive services or participate in an activity. The school staff must describe what the student will miss by not attending the regular education classroom.

Questions for parents to consider

- What are your hopes and dreams for your child?
- What needs were identified in the most recent evaluation, and what supports and services may be needed for your child to be successful in their LRE?
- Is your child currently enrolled in a child care or preschool program? Your child's current environment should be part of the IEP team placement discussion.

If your child is making the transition from early intervention services (birth to 3 years) to preschool services (3 to 5 years), or if your child becomes eligible for services after the age of three:

- What time of year does your child turn three? Many inclusive preschool programs fill up at the beginning of the school year, so it may be difficult to find an inclusive classroom for a child turning three in the middle of the year. In most districts, a child must turn three prior to September 1 in order to be placed in an inclusive classroom setting. The IEP team would then consider other appropriate placements for the child.

If your child is transitioning from preschool to kindergarten:

- Is your child currently participating in an inclusive early childhood classroom?
- What school would your child attend for kindergarten if they did not have a disability or developmental delay?
- What level of progress has your child made in the preschool curriculum and on the IEP goals and objectives?
- Can your child be successful in a typical kindergarten classroom with supports and services designed to meet his or her individual needs? If not, what is the alternative setting, and how will your child have access to typically developing peers?