



How Do You Know That You Are Moving Toward Inclusion?

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. (DEC/NAEYC, 2009: 2).

There are many ways to think about inclusion. These range from “You know it when you see it” to the most detailed, scholarly definitions. But the fundamentals do not change.

As more children with special needs are included in community early learning settings, it is important to consider both overall program quality and inclusion quality – how well early childhood programs support individual children with special needs in an environment that is friendly, welcoming and enjoyable. Many practitioners respect the rights of children with disabilities to have access to the same community learning programs as other children, but may be concerned or confused about what resources are needed to ensure positive experiences for all of the children.

Research confirms¹ that inclusion quality does not happen by itself. *Practices* including adjustments and modifications to the physical environment, equipment and materials, director’s attitude and involvement, staff support, staff training, therapies, individual program plans, parents, involvement of typical children, boards or similar units, and preparing for transition to school are all critical to inclusion quality. Confidence, competence and commitment grow as staff work with a variety of children with special needs and benefit from supports that facilitate their success.

SpecialLink: The National Centre for Early Childhood inclusion developed and tested a reliable and valid measure of inclusion quality (See the article “Assessing Inclusion Quality: What Gets Measured Counts!” in the Fall, 2010 issue of *Interaction*). The *SpecialLink Early Childhood Inclusion Quality Scale*, used by trained early childhood professionals, can be an effective, reliable tool to determine the quality of inclusion in child care programs and the capacities of programs to improve inclusion quality.

For more information on the *SpecialLink Early Childhood Inclusion Quality Scale*, visit www.speciallinkcanada.org

Inclusion in early learning centres includes six key principles:

- zero reject — no child is excluded on the basis of level or type of disability;
- natural proportions — programs include children with disabilities in rough proportion to their presence in the population;
- full participation — activities and routines are modified and adapted to include all children;
- same range of program options — parents of children with disabilities have the same options (eg., full day, part day, flexible hours) that other parents have;
- maximum feasible parent participation — parents are actively encouraged to participate in the child care program; and
- pro-action for community inclusion — staff and parents promote inclusion in the whole community.

(Irwin, S. (2009). *The SpecialLink Early Childhood Inclusion Quality Scale*. NS: Breton Books.

Each of these elements must be present if inclusion is to be a reality in child care.

1. (Irwin, S., Lero, D. & Brophy, K. (2000). *Inclusion: The next generation in child care in Canada*. NS: Breton Books, pp. 91-97.