

CHILD CARE

plus +

SPRING 1999

Supporting Inclusion in Early Childhood Settings

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+ What's Your Attitude Toward Inclusion?

Attitudes and beliefs are very personal; they form the basis for how we perceive the world. As such, they affect early childhood professionals' responses to young children and their families in real ways. Because of the impact of attitudes and beliefs, becoming aware of them is critical.

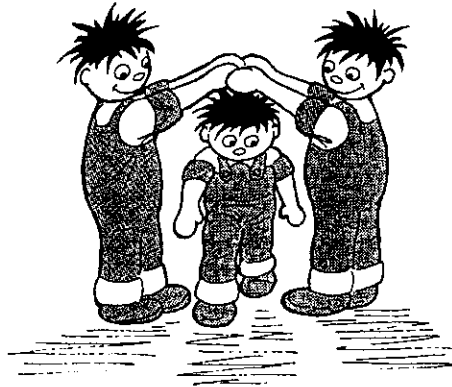
Beliefs are shaped by the past as well as by what happens today. You may be aware that an experience is shaping your attitude or it may happen without your knowing. Every new experience and bit of knowledge pass through the filter of beliefs. During the stages of your professional development, you may never have addressed your attitudes and beliefs even though they strongly affect your learning.

Most child care providers discover that they have a mix of positive and negative ideas about inclusion. These ideas are formed through a lifetime of experiences and continue to develop daily. Having a family member, neighbor, or friend with a disability often leads to positive feelings about including children with disabilities in their programs. For example, whenever you think about enrolling a child with cerebral palsy, the experiences you have had with your cousin with cerebral palsy may make it seem easier.

Many negative attitudes and beliefs are based on lack of experience. For example, if you attended a school where there were no children with disabilities enrolled, you may feel apprehensive or even fearful of inclusion because you are facing the "unknown."

Having already provided care for a young child with a disability can create an attitude of acceptance. If last year you enrolled a child with Down syndrome, you may feel more confident about your ability to not only care for other young children with Down syndrome but to enroll children with other types of developmental delays.

Some attitudes and beliefs are based on the attitudes and beliefs of others. For example, a colleague may refuse to take a child who is still in diapers, and persuade you to do the same.



Becoming aware of attitudes and beliefs is as important as seeking new knowledge, reading current literature, and developing early childhood skills. You can get in touch with your own personal attitudes and beliefs about inclusion by paying attention to your emotional responses to—and reflecting on—ideas and

events. Here are a few questions to help you: ❖ What am I feeling right now? ❖ Why do I feel this way? ❖ Why do I always avoid that situation? ❖ Why do I feel so excited/frustrated about this new information? ❖ Where might my response be coming from? ❖ Why do I feel comfortable (or uncomfortable) when people talk about this topic?

Beliefs and attitudes are constantly evolving and being refined. Asking questions whenever you feel strong emotions can make attitude assessment a natural part of your learning process. While taking such a close look at yourself may not be an easy or comfortable task, your attitude is directly related to your ability to confidently care for children with disabilities. + SLM/SHW

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+ FROM THE SOURCE

Watch Out for Attitudes

Strong attitudes and beliefs about inclusion are not confined to child care providers. Parents and specialists have ideas about what they value, based on their own knowledge and experience. Considering these differences, you may wonder how early intervention and special education teams are able to accomplish so much. To help you cope with the power of attitudes and beliefs of team members, consider the following:

- Admit the obvious. Personal beliefs and attitudes affect what you do and how you do it.
- Acknowledge attitudes and beliefs as part of the problem-solving process.
- As you become aware of attitudes, recognize that each team member is responsible for his or her own attitudes and their impact on the team's efforts.
- Respect differences. Attitudes and beliefs are personal and private. Feeling respected for your beliefs is key to your being able to articulate them or set them aside for a common goal.
- Speak up when you feel attitudes or beliefs are getting in the way of effectively working together.

Using these ideas can help bring you closer to truly meeting the needs of young children and their families.

+ SLM/SHW

+ MAKING IT WORK

Sharing Your Beliefs

Within your program, look for ways to share your ideas about inclusion so that families, staff, and children can learn more about what you believe. Here are a few ideas to get you started. Can you think of others to add below?

- ▶ Give parents opportunities to explain their child's current interests and abilities on enrollment materials and in daily interactions.
- ▶ Use what you know and what you observe about each child to plan activities and arrange play materials.
- ▶ Post artwork that highlights each child's strengths.
- ▶ Take photos of what inclusion looks like to you.
- ▶ Send notes home that let parents know you celebrate their child's unique abilities.
- ▶ Embed your beliefs in appropriate sections of your parent materials or handbook.
- ▶ Give parents, professionals, and other members of the community natural opportunities to share their accomplishments, strengths, and abilities.
- ▶ Use children's developmental goals as a guide for developing and modifying activities and routines.

▶ _____
▶ _____

+ SAM

+ NOTES FROM HOME:

Parents Know

I did not even *want* to take Chi to preschool. I am his mother and teacher; we play and learn together every day. Since we moved to the United States, I notice the faces of people we meet at the market and at the park. Sometimes I see pity; sometimes I see them look away. Sometimes they talk to me and pretend Chi is not there. I want him to get an education. I want him to have friends his own age. I want him to belong in the community. I asked myself, *am I being too protective?*

I agreed to look at preschools to give Chi experience playing and learning with other children. I was prepared for many bad experiences. I took the list of preschools in my neighborhood. I asked each one for materials and information. I studied them one by one. I was looking for an accepting place for Chi. One of them stood out. I asked myself, *could this kind of acceptance and individual concern be real?*

I wanted to know more. I called the woman and made an appointment to bring Chi to meet her and look at her preschool. I wanted to see her face. When we arrived, I watched closely. I did not see pity; she did not turn away. She did not talk to me and pretend that Chi was not there. She bent down and talked to Chi. She gave him a toy she saw him looking at. She let him take it home. She said he could bring it back the next time he came to play with her.

I went with Chi when other preschoolers were there. I watched their faces. They did not look with pity; they wanted him to play. They showed him the toys. They took him to see the bunny. They asked me if he could come again. Now I take Chi to preschool every morning. He is getting better prepared to go to school. I ask myself, *how are we so lucky?* +

+ SPOTLIGHT: Education Shapes Attitudes

Since 1994, 130 child care providers and other early childhood professionals have completed the Child Care plus+ Self-study Course on Inclusion in Early Childhood Programs through the University of Montana-Missoula. While the course emphasizes practical strategies to make inclusion work, it also offers numerous learning activities designed to raise participants' awareness of their attitudes and beliefs about inclusion. Following are a few participant comments.

ABOUT SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

■ *I now have a better understanding of how much we are all alike despite our differences. ■ I really had never heard of the concept of "inclusion" in child care. It was something I had never given any thought to because I didn't have any children with physical disabilities in any of the centers I have worked. The day I talked to the learning facilitator on the phone is when I think I really started getting "it"—the idea of not pointing out differences, just including them.*

ABOUT FEAR

■ *... this course has helped me deal with some of the fear that I've had about inclusion. ■ Inclusion seemed scary at first, but I am more comfortable with it now. ■ I am more aware of what inclusion means and although it at times will remain a challenge I am not frightened by it. I know that inclusion can mean easy and simple changes and if I do not know how to make these changes there are several resources in the community where I can seek my answers. I have relaxed and can look at inclusion as a positive element of my program.*

ABOUT BROADENING EARLY CHILDHOOD PHILOSOPHY

■ *I've learned how important it is for children with disabilities to be with other children to help them grow and learn. ■ Inclusion is a way or philosophy of including all children not just involving the child with disabilities. ■ I really didn't know what inclusion meant to me and my program. Now I have learned that inclusion involves more than just accepting a child with disabilities into my program. It is accepting and adjusting, learning and growing, encouraging and urging each child according to his/her own specific needs. ■ I also realize that not just the child, but the entire family also needs inclusion!*

ABOUT CONFIDENCE

■ *I feel better prepared for a child with a disability now, than I would have before I started the course. I feel more confident and informed with what my role is and just the overall look at all children. At first I was very apprehensive that it would take up all of my time and not be a positive*

thing. But now I feel that would be difficult at first, but easy to adjust. I also think it would be very beneficial to all children to become used to children who are different in any way. ■ I am different. I am more informed and have a new confidence. All of the children have benefitted in my program because I'm more flexible and trying to better meet each individual need. ■ I feel like I'm able to start inclusion in my day care. I feel comfortable with it, more at ease. Sounded different and hard at first; [now] it sounds like a learning experience I will enjoy.

ABOUT CHANGE

■ *Inclusion has taken a 360 degree turn for me. I wasn't really aware of my responsibilities to it . . . and I was basically thinking that it could be someone else's deal, not mine. But I now realize that inclusion needs an open mind and then it isn't really any different! I must always remember that the person is always a person before they are disabled in any way. And that there are many people out there to help. ■ I didn't realize that inclusion didn't mean that I had to hire tons of extra staff, knock down walls and rearrange, or build a huge ramp to the front of my house. Many things I do with my present children, I would do with a child with a disability. I also know now that I had some of the skills it requires to work with a child with a disability before I started. This course has helped me recognize and refine those skills. My program has changed because I have incorporated inclusion practices even though all of the children enrolled are developing normally. ■ I have a better understanding of inclusion. It's more than just being there. It's a spirit of complete participation and oneness, at one's own level.*

Self-study learning provides the ideal opportunity for individual practitioners to examine personal—and sometimes emotional—attitudes and beliefs, because they are asked to reflect on them in the safety of their own homes and programs. Having these opportunities over 30-32 weeks of course work allows for exploring, practicing, and reflecting upon inclusion issues over and over again from different angles and from both familiar and unfamiliar perspectives. When practitioners take advantage of these learning opportunities to reflect on their personal attitudes and beliefs about inclusion, it is sure to have a positive impact on their early childhood practice. + SLM

For information about the Child Care plus+ Course on Inclusion, call Susan Harper-Whalen at 1-800-235-4122.

+ What do I do when . . . ?

QUESTION: *I really believe that I would welcome any child into my program, but I am hearing alarming stories from other child care providers. Is a positive attitude really enough?*

ANSWER: While there is sometimes a big gap between *attitude* and *ability*, a positive attitude can have an incredible effect on your approach to the challenges that will most surely arise for you as a child care provider. A positive attitude is often described as a "can do" or a "why not" perspective. This position creates an open door for new ideas, new information, and new skills.

Attitudes serve as filters for everything that is said about a child. For instance, let's say a child comes to your program who, you are told, has been asked to leave several other early childhood settings. While this information may make you anxious, a positive attitude will make it more likely that you will look at a number of factors, explore many solutions, and use every skill at your disposal to work with the family to make your program a good placement for this child. Contrast this response with that of the individual who tells her director she is not prepared to deal with any of "those kids."

Your attitude filter impacts your choices for professional development, your ability to develop skills, and your willingness to make changes in your program. For example, your positive attitude makes it more likely that you would be willing to learn how to perform an unfamiliar medical procedure or acquire sign language skills. Contrast this with the teacher who believes that because she has always done things a certain way, she should not have to make a change for just one child!

The simple truth is that inclusion is more likely to work when you believe it can. Attitudes affect our acquisition of knowledge as well as our ability to use that knowledge

effectively. Your attitude towards problems and challenges directly affects not only your response to them, but the probability of a successful outcome for everyone involved, including you. Is a positive attitude enough, probably not, but it is *almost* enough. + SLM

Child Care plus+ staff are available to answer questions, brainstorm, problem-solve, and provide resources and information about inclusion. Call 1-800-235-4122

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

Child Care plus+ has developed a survey designed to raise awareness and help individuals identify personal attitudes and beliefs regarding including children with disabilities in early childhood programs. *What's My Attitude? A Personal Survey of Beliefs About Inclusion in Early Childhood Programs* reflects important fundamental beliefs about early childhood inclusion. The survey has instructions, ten agree/disagree statements, three open-ended questions, and suggestions for using the results. For information, call 1-800-235-4122 or send \$2.00 to Attitude Survey, Child Care plus+, MUARID, The University of Montana, 634 Eddy Avenue, Missoula, MT 59812-6696.

CHILD CARE plus+ is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators. *CHILD CARE plus+* is published quarterly. Subscription price is \$ 5.00 per year (four issues). Contents may be reproduced without permission; please include reference.

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