



## Spearheading the Commitment to Align Early Educator Preparation with the U.S. Federal Policy on Inclusion

COUNCIL  
for  
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RECOGNITION

*White Paper*

**T**he important issue of inclusion of children with special needs in early care and education programs has once again come to the forefront of the national dialogue. This year marks the tenth anniversary of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), a statement placing the issue of the basic human rights for persons with special needs, including the right to inclusive education, onto the world stage. This statement was publicly endorsed and supported by 166 nations around the world. However, in 2012 the U.S. Congress fell six votes short of agreeing to this United Nations statement.

Guaranteeing rights, including the right to education for children with special needs, has long been problematic in the U.S. In 1999, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Olmstead v. L.C.* stated that the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) law enacted in 1990 created legal protections to eliminate discrimination against people with a range of special needs and that they should receive services and supports in the "most integrated setting appropriate."

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services released a joint statement entitled "Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs." This document described ways of ensuring that young children receive the educational benefits of ADA as early in life as possible. Of special note to the Council for Professional Recognition (the Council) is the emphasis on creating a coordinated early childhood professional development system that includes a focus on establishing a "common knowledge and competency base" across the entirety of early childhood education programming regardless of funding stream, federal state or local auspices.

### General Recommendations of the Federal Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Special Needs in Early Childhood Programs

- ✓ Create a state-level interagency task force and plan for inclusion
- ✓ Ensure state policies support high-quality inclusion
- ✓ Review and modify resource allocations
- ✓ Build a coordinated early childhood professional development (PD) system
- ✓ Ensure quality rating frameworks are inclusive
- ✓ Build a common knowledge and competency base across child-serving providers
- ✓ Make sure that state certifications, credentials, and workforce preparation programs have a strong focus on inclusion

The Council established the Child Development Associate® (CDA) Credential™ decades ago to meet this nation's need for a comprehensive competency based system of early educator professional development. It is the only credential recognized and delivered in all fifty states, the U.S. military, and several international countries. The Council believes that the policy statement recommendations align with CDA® Credential process and practices. An example of the CDA's® commitment to inclusion practices is our newest *Essentials for Working with Young Children (Essentials)*<sup>1</sup> textbook, which provides abundant detail on inclusion practices. For example, the "Adapting Gross Motor Play to Meet Children's Special Needs" text box, an excerpt from *Essentials*, highlights early educator instructions for aligning gross motor play to meet children's needs.

### **Adapting Gross Motor Play to Meet Children's Special Needs<sup>1</sup>**

Let children show you what they can do, rather than setting your expectations prematurely. Follow their lead, and you will learn how best to adapt your program to meet their individual needs.

*The children in Ms. Prince's class are scheduled to run relay races this afternoon. Juwan, a 4-year-old with physical disabilities, can walk, but not run. Ms. Prince wants Juwan to join in the children's gross motor play, but worries that he will fall and become frustrated. She does not want Juwan to "fail" in front of his peers.*

*She considers appointing him scorekeeper so that he can still be involved in the activity and avoid failure. However, this would deprive him of the chance to really experience gross motor activity. Ms. Prince decides to forego the relay races and instead schedules a scavenger hunt, during which the children will work in teams and walk around the playground in search of items found in clues. This activity successfully meets Juwan's skills where they are and allows him to fully participate with his peers.*

The Council joins these national and international organizations in their commitment to create a stronger professional development system for early educators to better serve all children. The Council's major contribution to this effort is its role in building a coordinated professional development system that supports inclusion through our CDA® Credential, which has been built around a set of core knowledge of early childhood education competencies. Through the CDA® Credential, the Council also ensures quality rating frameworks are inclusive through the CDA® required hours of training for obtaining a credential. This white paper's purpose is to review the Council's commitment to those policy recommendations for both the early educators and the early educator preparation programs.

## **Background**

Federal law governing inclusion in education has been in place since 1975 when the U.S. Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Child Act, a precursor to IDEA. This law "ensures services to children with special needs throughout the nation."<sup>3</sup> IDEA has been regularly updated to include more special needs in their definition of children to receive services. The most recent revision was in 1986, and updated regulations were passed in 2016. One of the critical updates was to expand "Early Intervention," or Part C. What Early Intervention defines is high quality early education services for infants and toddlers who have a developmental delay or disability to receive special needs services.<sup>3</sup>

In the past, there had not been a set infrastructure in place to assist programs in applying these practices in all child care settings. For over 400,000 CDA® Credential holders, the Council has provided a systemic approach to promulgating inclusive child care practices since 1975. The Council has and continues to accomplish this goal through

its inclusive materials, adaptive teaching strategies, and required training hours to build on their professional skill set to serve children with a wide range of abilities.

The Council believes it is critical for early educators to understand the meaning of the law and the best practices to provide high quality inclusive services children with special needs and their families. Inclusion of children with special needs in early care and education settings promotes healthy development for all the children involved. It also aligns with ethical practice for early educators, and it works best when all early educators receive the appropriate educational training to best serve children within their communities. A combination of group training and coaching helps early educators use recommended practices more regularly than educators who are not provided with these supports.<sup>4</sup> At the Council, we believe young children with special needs deserve high quality early education in inclusive settings with their peers, a realistic goal when early educators work hand-in-hand with physicians and therapists to adapt their settings and provide activities that enhance learning for children with a range of special needs receive.

### What is Inclusion?

What do we mean by “children with special needs”? According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA):

A child with a disability means a child who has been evaluated as having a developmental delay, a hearing impairment, speech or language impairment, or visual impairment (including blindness). Children can be evaluated as having a serious emotional disturbance, a physical impairment, traumatic brain injury as a result of an accident, special health care needs like autism or inability to digest food, or even multiple disabilities.<sup>2</sup>

## The CDA's® Inclusive Professional Development System

The Council takes seriously its role as the early childhood education institution that serves more early educators than any other institution in the United States. For that reason, our commitment to ensuring that all early educators are prepared to work effectively with children with special needs and their families has been unwavering.

Long before federal legislation mandating inclusion, and from its inception, the Council has always promoted the preparation of early educators to support children with special needs. The Council's commitment to inclusion was first seen in the work of our early pioneers. One of the early leaders in developing principles of the Council, Jan Yocum de' Calderon, directed early childhood grants serving children with special needs in the 1960s, efforts that preceded IDEA. Ms. Yocum de' Calderon helped develop the CDA® competencies in 1974. She was an expert on inclusion and dual language learners.

### To Continually Renew Our Commitment

The concept of inclusive services continues to be integrated into the CDA® Competency Standards, a set of national standards that serve as criteria to evaluate early educators' performance while working with children of all abilities, their families, colleagues and their communities. The five methods we use to promote early educator competency on inclusion are:

- The Council now requires all new and renewing candidates to earn credit hours through courses on caring for children with special needs.
- The Council includes information on creating high quality, positive, inclusive learning environments for all children, as well as how to best support families and garner therapeutic and supplemental resources, in the 2016 CDA® *Essentials for Working with Young Children* textbook.

- Our CDA® assessment ensures that early educators have basic skills in adapting their settings for inclusion.
- The CDA® Credential promotes multilingual early care and education settings and supports dual language learners' curricula, as outlined in *Essentials for Working with Young Children*.
- The Council's Multilingual & Special Programs provides accommodations for CDA® candidates with special needs when they need to take the CDA® assessment. This department also provides specialized training for Professional Development Specialists who oversee and complete the Verification Visit; a requirement to obtain the CDA® Credential.

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*“For children with social and emotional concerns: Provide quiet spaces like a “be by myself” space or a comfy corner that children can go to when they need a break. Reduce the noise level through carpeting and acoustic paneling. Help children to self-regulate their nervous systems through heavy block play or by wearing a weighted vest or a backpack filled with books.”<sup>1</sup>*

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As part of the Council's commitment to disseminating knowledge to early educators and early education training organizations, the Council offers the following strategies and next steps for those groups.

## For Early Educators

Educators should:

- Be mindful of the ethical principles of the early care and education field, which stress a focus on individualizing educational strategies, observation, and scaffolding as methods of developmental enhancement.

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*“To support the right of each child to play and learn in an inclusive environment that meets the needs of children with and without disabilities.*

*To advocate for and ensure that all children, including those with special needs, have access to the support services needed to be successful.”<sup>5</sup>*

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*Section I – Ethical Responsibilities to Children, NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment.*

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- Consider potential professional development opportunities in early education that may arise from interactions with therapists in the early education setting and pre-service training to care for children with special needs.
- Align their ability to provide developmentally appropriate knowledge of practice and individualization in their chosen early care and education setting.



## For Early Educator Preparation Programs

Preparation programs should:

- Train the early education workforce to properly care for children with special needs.
- Set up and periodically update early education curricula to include the latest developments in inclusion practices within all child care settings.
- Help provide available local resources to support inclusive early educator preparation through workshops, continuing education, and materials through child care resource and referral agencies, non-profit organizations, government agencies, etc.

## Conclusion

The Council has consistently:

- Built a coordinated early care and education professional development system through creating and updating early educator preparation standards to match contemporary needs.
- Ensured that the quality rating frameworks are inclusive through requiring early educators obtaining a CDA® Credential take preparation courses on caring for children with special needs.
- Guaranteed that our CDA® Credential has a strong focus on inclusion built on a common knowledge base identified through the competency base across child-serving providers. Also by having educators adhere to the CDA® Competency Standards for working with all children.
- Provided guidance on successfully applying inclusive practices in early care and education settings for children and their families in our textbook, *Essentials for Working with Young Children*.

Thousands of early education preparation programs rely on the CDA® as an essential part of their training. We encourage and influence each of them to continually make sure that inclusion issues are an integral part of their curriculum through the updated CDA® requirements for all new and renewal applicants. One of the important lessons the Council has learned during its 40 year commitment to providing high quality child care practices within all early education settings is that inclusion of children with special needs is a social justice issue that requires ongoing activism and pledge from every educator and voice in the field. At the Council, we actively support and join the important work represented in the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' inclusion policy statement. ■

- 1 Washington, V. (2013). *Essentials for Working with Young Children*. Washington, DC: The Council for Professional Recognition.
- 2 United States Department of Education. (2015). IDEA 2004 Regulations: Part 300/A/300.8. Child with a disability. Retrieved from <http://www.ideapartnership.org/topics-database/idea-2004/idea-2004-part-b/1396-definition-of-child-with-a-disability.html>
- 3 United States Department of Education. (2004). *Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004*. Retrieved from <http://idea.ed.gov/>
- 4 Lawrence, S., Smith, S. & Banerjee, R. (2016). *Preschool Inclusion: Key Findings from Research and Implications for Policy and Future Research*. New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty.
- 5 DEC/NAEYC. (2009). *Early childhood inclusion: A joint position statement of the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute. Retrieved from [http://npdci.fpg.unc.edu/resources/articles/Early\\_Childhood\\_Inclusion](http://npdci.fpg.unc.edu/resources/articles/Early_Childhood_Inclusion)



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