Activity-Based Support for Children with Different Developmental and Functional Needs*

Script

Introduction

Welcome to “Activity-Based Support for Children with Different Developmental and Functional Needs.” This 2-hour course is part of a series of online trainings designed to help you, as child care providers and directors, to gain a better understanding of how to create an inclusive child care environment for infants and toddlers. Inclusion basically means that all children, regardless of ability, are allowed to have the same experiences in the same environments as their peers. Including a child with differing abilities does not mean that the environment must be perfectly (and expensively) adapted, but that accommodations can be made to allow these children to experience the normal joys of childhood.

An important part of creating an inclusive child care environment is offering children the opportunity to be fully engaged in activities that will promote their physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development. During this course, we will examine key components of an appropriate environment for infants and toddlers, focusing specifically on how materials and activities can be modified, if necessary, to ensure that children with different developmental and functional needs are successful in your child care setting.

Learning Objectives

By the time you have completed this course, you should be able to:

• Explain how observation can be used to make simple modifications to your program’s activities to ensure that all children are effectively included,
• List the six messages that invite children to enjoy, experience, and learn through interaction with the child care environment,
• Identify the key components of an appropriate environment for infants and toddlers, including those with disabilities, and
• Describe how materials and daily activities can be modified for children with disabilities.

Definition of Inclusion

In a joint effort to create a national definition of inclusion, the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Division of Early Childhood recently released a position paper describing the key features of inclusive child care. In that paper, the authors describe inclusion in this way: “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. The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential.”

**Observation**

One of the most important features of inclusive child care is the full participation of all children in program activities. For this to happen successfully, however, child care providers need to assess their program on a regular basis to determine areas of strength and areas that could use improvement. Carefully observing the children in your program is one of the best ways to determine their current level of participation and what modifications can be made to maximize the involvement of all children, including those with disabilities.

Since you already work with young children, you may believe that you "observe" them daily. However, many early childhood professionals have little opportunity to carefully observe one child in the group because they are responsible for tending to the needs of several children at the same time. There are a number of practical reasons why you should continually develop your ability to observe young children. Observation helps you get in touch with the child. It can tell you what he knows how to do, what he likes to do, what he finds frustrating, how he feels about himself, and what would encourage his involvement. This information can be used in many ways, such as coming to conclusions about a child’s development, looking for progress in specific areas, choosing toys and play materials, and arranging the environment to respond to a child’s needs.

When you use observation as a tool to identify a child's strengths and needs, you are purposefully setting aside the time to focus on one child. Ideally, you observe the child in different activities and at different times of the day to obtain the best overall picture of what the child can do. Remember that observation allows you to identify what the child does in your setting; this may be different from what the child does in another setting or from what the parent or therapist describes.

As a child care provider, you may be among the first to notice a child’s disability or special needs. You play a key role in recognizing that a child may need special help and in connecting families with the systems of help that address children’s developmental and disability-related needs. Observation is a very important tool when it comes to infants and toddlers. Make it a practice to observe one or two children daily. Take notes about what the child is doing, what she likes, and how she responds when participating in various activities. The most important aspect of observation is to be factual.

Set realistic expectations for how and when to observe the child. Be realistic about your abilities. It is neither practical nor necessary to observe a child for large blocks of time. It may be best to set aside five or ten minutes during different parts of your routine on a regular basis. Many find it easier to observe outdoor play when they can step back from interacting with the children more easily. Look for five minutes during snack time and other group activities when children are engaged and will not be easily distracted by your taking notes about what they are doing. If you
try to observe a child for a whole morning, it is unlikely that you will be able to accomplish the task without having someone take your place in the program. Many child care centers have a “rover” who can fill in for staff members during certain times of day or assist with various activities. This person might even be the director of the child care program. In cases where you need to observe a child or give special attention to a child during an activity, the “rover” can be used to make sure that the other children are appropriately supervised and receive the attention they need. Using this person to assist you or other staff members allows you to maintain the appropriate staff-child ratio without having to hire another person.

As you begin to observe children, make sure that you write down your observations. Having a written record can be used in many ways. You can easily use a written record to communicate with families and other specialists who work with the child. Ideally, you should record what you see during the observation or immediately afterwards. It is surprising how often subtle, but important thoughts that occur as you watch a child are often forgotten if you wait to write them down later. It is often helpful to file these records in the child's permanent file so that they are readily accessible.

There is never a shortage of interesting situations to observe in early childhood programs, but it may be difficult to find time to observe. These suggestions may help:

- Use index cards to jot down your observations. They are small enough to fit in a pocket and sturdy enough to last throughout the day.
- Start the day with a few index cards or pieces of paper and a pen in your pocket so that you are ready when an observable moment occurs.
- Keep extra pens handy, but out of reach of the children.
- Write down observations of individual children on separate pieces of paper so that each can be dated and put into the child's file.
- Review your roster frequently and be sure that you are observing each of the children on a rotating basis.

Be objective; record what you see, not what you think you see. Think of yourself as a play-by-play sports announcer. You simply report what you see as accurately as possible. Avoid recording any assumptions about what the child may feel or intend. When you see a child hit another child, you might assume anger or frustration as the motivating factors. But what you really see is hitting. Try to get past the temptation to record that Ashley loves playing with the blocks, and simply say that Ashley played with the blocks for 20 minutes, stacked them up three or four blocks high and knocked them over, picked them up, stacked them, and knocked them down again. Don’t write that Simon “enjoyed playing with the blocks.” Rather, note that “Simon was laughing and interacting with other children in the block area.”

To improve your skills as an objective observer, consider the following:

- Use words that describe actions rather than words that judge actions. For example, "She stomped her foot" rather than "She was really mad," or "He held onto his Mom and asked her not to leave" rather than "He is very attached to his Mom." Describing actions rather than judging actions is often harder than it sounds. Review your comments when you complete an observation and eliminate subjective or judgmental words or phrases.
• Gather observation records over time in order to see trends and patterns in behavior. Limited observation time can lead you to faulty conclusions based on a bad day or a single point of upset in a child's life. Vary the times, activities, and even days of the week that you choose to observe a particular child. You need to get a picture of the whole child; in the morning and afternoon, at recess, circle time, and play time, and on Monday as well as Tuesday and Wednesday.

• Observation needs to be a part of the regular routine to truly remain objective and useful—while the child is having good days as well as during challenging times. Schedule observation moments in your daily plan so you do not limit yourself to picking up the pencil only when things go wrong.

Observe again and again and again. You may need to conduct ongoing observations of a child before you begin to understand the child's behavior. At any given time a child may be overly excited, tired, bored, anxious, or irritable, and the observations you record may not be typical or reliable. Because you will use this record as a way to plan activities, be sure you have sufficient and accurate information. You can use this record to document changes in children's behavior over time by observing the child during the same kind of activity several times over the year. The ongoing development you discover would be hard to document on a one-time assessment.

Trust what you see. Your instincts as an early childhood professional are one of your best assets. Trust what you notice during your observation, even if it appears unlikely. For example, if you see a child who, from your past experience, does not know colors, now spontaneously sorting blocks by color, you have learned something important about this child's skills. On the other hand, if the physical therapist has told you that she has mastered the skill of getting herself in and out of her wheelchair, you should not assume that the child can use the skill in your program unless you see her exhibit the skill. Keep in mind, this does not mean that the physical therapist is wrong; it simply means that you did not observe the action or skill in your setting.

Use the information! As fascinating as it may be, your observation is not worth much in and of itself unless you use the information you collect. The value of recording observations lies in your using the information to plan activities that are relevant for the child or modify your program in some way to reflect what you have learned about the children as a group. Information obtained through your careful observations can be quite valuable to communicate with families and specialists and can give them a better understanding of what the child does in your program. For example, you have observed Moesha having a very difficult time during art activities that involve drawing. Since you know that Moesha has very limited vision, you use the information you gained from your observation to include tactile materials, such as glitter, fabric scraps, pipe cleaners, popsicle sticks, glue, and feathers for making pictures instead of just relying on the crayons and paint the children have always used to create pictures. An added benefit to expanding the materials the children have available is that Moesha is not the only child who decides to use these three-dimensional art materials in their creations.

Information gained from observations can be used to make simple and effective changes or modifications in your program or group. This kind of information will allow you to individualize each child’s learning plan. These types of observations are very valuable in determining whether
or not a child is progressing in a typical fashion. If you believe she is not, then professionals may need to be called in to evaluate the situation.

**Individualized Family Service Plans**

An *Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)* is a document intended to help families and professionals within a community support the special needs of a child under the age of three. The IFSP focuses on providing supports and services to the family of a very young child with special needs in order to help that family enhance their child's growth and development.

The IFSP is developed based on in-depth assessments of the child by a variety of professionals. In addition to learning goals and supports, the IFSP documents the child's current developmental level, describes outcomes for the child and family, and specifies community services for the child and family that will support the development of the whole child. The IFSP includes the needs of the whole family, with the parents as major contributors in its development. IFSP team members may come from a variety of different organizations and may include medical professionals, physical and occupational therapists, speech therapists, child development specialists, child care providers, early intervention specialists, social workers, and others.

Working with the IFSP team is a great resource for you in meeting a child's needs. The child's parents can invite you to attend an IFSP meeting or request that an IFSP team member visit their child while in care and offer suggestions for improving the child's participation or addressing your concerns. In order to attend an IFSP meeting or consult with any of the team members, you must have written permission from the child's parent or guardian. Some parents may not realize that you would be open to an invitation to an IFSP meeting or welcome an IFSP team member in the classroom. Take the time to explain to parents of children with disabilities how your participation can enhance their child's experience in the child care program. Some parents may choose not to include you on the IFSP team. This can happen for a number of reasons, and is entirely the parent's choice. If that is the case for a child in your care, work to build a positive, trusting relationship with the parents and request information directly from them about how you can best serve their child's needs.

The IFSP is the guiding document for planning for the child's daily activities. It is important to read and understand this document and visit with the parents about their goals and hopes for their child. Understanding the IFSP will allow you to plan appropriate and valuable activities for the child with a particular disability. Your individualized plan for the child should include activities that will help the child move to the specified outcomes. Your observations, which we discussed earlier, will likely be an important part of the IFSP document. If Early Childhood Intervention, or ECI, professionals are part of the team, be sure to welcome them into your facility to conduct additional observations of the child. ECI professionals can help problem solve and suggest useful ideas on how to increase the child’s participation in everyday activities.

**Arranging the Environment for Learning**

Let’s now turn our attention to how the physical environment is arranged. The physical environment provides important cues to young children. Careful arrangement of the environment
can encourage children's independent play and set the stage for development of play skills and social competence. Knowing how to plan and prepare a nurturing environment is especially important in settings which include young children with disabilities. Messages that are too subtle may be overlooked by some children. They may need help in order to learn how to interact with toys, play materials, and their peers. For instance, a child with poor vision may need books with larger print or many pictures. A child with a hearing impairment may need for you to add more visuals related to how to use the toys. A child with a cognitive disability may need someone to role model how to play with certain toys. The arrangement of the physical environment can enhance development and promote each child's participation in the every-day activities provided in the early childhood setting. By using the environment effectively, you help children learn to respond directly to messages in the environment without depending on adult directions.

In most cases, modifying the child care environment does not mean making major changes that are costly or intrusive. Rather, small changes can be made to allow for the necessary accommodations to create the perfect space for all children, including those with disabilities.

Arranging the environment to invite children to play simply requires creativity and a bit of energy. In this module, you will learn concrete strategies that help you use materials already available in your program to send an invitation to the children. Inviting children to play using environmental arrangement may seem both familiar and unusual. As an early childhood professional, you are already familiar with setting up the play space. More than likely, this is a task you do every morning. But arranging the environment is much more than setting out toys for the children to play with. It means arranging toys and play materials so that you send a clear message to children about what is expected. It means taking advantage of the environment to give young children more play ideas and more information to use in exploring their interests. You will learn to use the environment as a powerful teaching tool which speaks directly to the children.

Whenever you make changes in the physical space, the overall goal should be to create an environment that invites children to play. But don't children already know how to play? Definitely! Play is one of the most important ways children express what they know and explore new ideas. In settings where children gather in groups, children learn from playing with each other as well as from interacting with play materials. You might think that any room full of toys is an "invitation" to play and, for most children, it is. However, some children in your care, including some with disabilities, may need extra help in order to fully respond to this invitation. When a child is not able to respond to subtle messages in the environment, toys and materials can be arranged to give clear suggestions that direct the child's play.

**Environmental Messages**

In their inclusive child care curriculum *Practical Strategies for Early Childhood Programs*, Child Care Plus+ identifies six environmental messages that invite children to enjoy, experience, and learn through the environment. These messages include: independence, exploration, practice, challenge, interaction, and creativity. Let’s take several minutes to look at each of these messages. Each environmental message includes examples which help you see what the environment looks like when toys and materials are arranged to convey this message. The
suggestions are especially appropriate for very young children who have disabilities or developmental delays, but this information is helpful in arranging the environment for all of the children who spend time in your program.

You may notice that the suggestions included here describe common play behavior of young children—what you see children doing every day. Giving additional information and environmental cues about how to play helps children with disabilities experience the same type of play activities that other children engage in daily. While the impact of environmental arrangement on young children with disabilities may be clearly seen, children without disabilities also benefit from these environmental messages by becoming more quickly engaged in play, trying out more complicated play ideas, and engaging in more cooperative play with other children.

You can support and foster children's independence when you arrange the environment to encourage them to play with toys and materials without your assistance. An environment that promotes independence sends a direct message to children. This type of environment reduces children's dependence on prompts or cues from other children and/or adults. This message is particularly important for children who wander from toy to toy continually checking in with you to see what is expected, who enter a room hesitantly or reluctantly, and who seem to have a difficult time getting involved in activities or typical routines. Look at the handout on Independence. It provides some practical ways to encourage independence in young children. For instance, place one or two toys within the reach of an infant during “tummy time.” Think about the child’s mobility and make certain that the toy is actually reachable at some point, even if this means moving it to allow the child satisfaction in the task. This gives the child a goal and allows her to know that she can make choices about her playthings.

Young children often seek and wait for directions from caregivers before acting on their environment. While this is certainly an important part of learning, some children with disabilities constantly wait for directions from adults or other children before beginning to explore and play. It is certainly possible to direct a child toward an activity using words or gestures, but you can give those same "directions" through the arrangement of materials and equipment. In early childhood programs, the adults have numerous responsibilities. Having an environment that directs the children's play is one way of taking some of the pressure off of busy caregivers. The way the environment is arranged suggests ideas and offers children an invitation to play and participate that includes directions or cues about how to get started. The child is pulled into the routine, activity, or play area without relying on directions from you or other children. If the environment itself gives children cues, independent play can occur more readily. Please take a moment refer to the handout “Independence” for additional examples.

[HANDOUT: Independence]

Children learn from touching, tasting, smelling, hearing, and seeing play materials. When children explore a toy, they are able to learn about its many features. You support children's exploration when you include play materials that have a number of different dimensions to explore and are arranged to extend the period of time any one child might choose to play with the materials. Exploration does not necessarily mean playing with a toy in the "correct" way; it
means playing with a toy long enough to fully examine it. For instance, for a young infant, you can create a “texture blanket” by using several different pieces of fabric, each with a different “hand.” Find one that is fuzzy, one that is slippery, and one that is soft. Talk to the baby as he lies on the blanket and explores the surfaces. Give him the words to describe each sensation. Exploration can take place in five seconds or in fifteen minutes, but when you entice a child to play with a toy, he is more likely to truly explore it and learn something new from playing with it. If you are working with a child with a disability, whether physical or cognitive, you may need to spend some time exploring with him. He may need encouragement to touch, smell, or explore the materials. Introducing the concept of exploration will allow children to begin to explore independently.

Finding ways to help children explore a toy or group of toys could be one of the most valuable ways of helping young children develop and learn about the world. Providing opportunities for exploration is particularly important for some children because they frequently need assistance in order to fully explore play materials. A motor impairment, for example, may influence a child's ability to move through the environment, get to, and use play equipment, or hold onto and explore play materials. Other children with motor impairments may have difficulty holding a toy or coordinating their hands and fingers to activate a toy. You can make environmental changes that help children overcome physical or developmental limitations and create the possibility for them to explore objects and play materials. Children who have a limited attention span, on the other hand, may need help increasing the amount of time spent exploring any one toy. A child with a cognitive disability may need your help in understanding “how” to play with the toy. This does not mean that there is only one correct way to play with materials, but it can help a child get started. A child may seem to be constantly "busy" and yet not actually play with one toy long enough to really learn something about it. Use the handout on exploration to find other ideas for this type of play for young children.

[HANDOUT: Exploration]

You can reinforce children's current skills and abilities by embedding opportunities in the play environment to practice those skills using a variety of materials. Young children are learning new skills every day, and you can help them put this new information to use. By providing numerous opportunities to demonstrate a particular new skill, such as "putting things inside," you show children how useful and important that skill can be. Sometimes when children learn a new skill in one setting, it takes a while before they feel comfortable using that skill in other settings. In fact, children with disabilities often have to be taught the skill in one setting initially and then are given additional instruction in order to put that skill to use in a slightly different setting. Increasing the opportunities for practice gives children numerous opportunities to transfer skills or generalize them from one setting to another, as well as giving them a chance to have fun with newly learned skills.

In order to give children a chance to practice the skills they are learning, you need to observe children in your setting and identify those skills. This does not mean that you need to conduct a formal evaluation. But it does mean that you need to watch children play in your activity centers or play area and observe the different types of play behaviors you see them performing. All children, including infants, need to practice a new skill. For instance, if you are talking to an
infant, recreate the sounds he makes. Let him look in the mirror and see himself making the same sounds that he just heard. Generally, children practice the skills that give them pleasure (such as shaking objects to see if they make noise) or ones that open the way to new skills (such as walking or crawling).

Use the handout on practice to begin to think of other ways to help the children in your care practice their new skills.

[HANDOUT: Practice]

Environmental Messages (continued)

At the same time you are providing children with additional opportunities to practice skills they have already learned, you can arrange toys and materials to encourage children to take the skills they already know one (or more) steps farther. Children love challenge and it is easy to include challenges in an infant and toddler classroom. For children who are crawling, place some foam pillows or wedges on the floor so that they can figure out how to overcome the obstacles. The child may choose to go over or she may go around. Either way, she has met a challenge and overcome it.

You provide developmental challenges when your environment includes activities that build on children's current skills and encourage them to use them in new ways. To do this effectively, it is important to observe children at play and identify what play behaviors they already use.

Providing children with challenging opportunities, however, does not mean simply adding more difficult activities. A real challenge exists only if children are able to use existing skills, are motivated to use those skills in new situations, and are not frustrated by the experience. You can think about it as the "next step" for children, being careful to think about very small steps that are challenging but not frustrating. Placing an interesting toy on a low table would be a developmental challenge for a child only if he or she is motivated to pull up to the table and reach for the toy and has the strength to stand alone or supported by the table during play. An environment that is responsive to children's desire for more information and for new challenges can be an important part of teaching children with disabilities and development delays. See the handout on challenges for some more ideas.

[HANDOUT: Challenge]

Inclusive child care settings offer children with and without disabilities the opportunity to play in proximity to, and with, each other. This is true even though some children may be too young to actively play with peers and others may have no experience in group settings and limited social skills. Children of all ages and abilities can benefit from an environment that is arranged to give them opportunities to engage in interaction by watching other children at play, playing next to each other, and sharing in every-day games.

In a group of children, it is likely that there are numerous opportunities for children to play and interact with each other. At least that is the way it seems. So is it necessary to arrange the
environment differently to encourage interaction? Yes, it is! Remember, though, that interactions for infants generally means with another adult. They may play beside another child, but there will be little peer-to-peer interaction. As toddlers grow, they may begin to spend time engaging in similar play around their peers, but they still will have little interaction, unless they both want the same toy!

The ways in which children naturally interact may not necessarily be positive. Children with disabilities may not be able to take advantage of naturally occurring opportunities to play with peers. Without help, children with disabilities and their peers who are developing without any developmental delays may not spontaneously interact and play together at all!

A child with a disability may be overlooked in a group play situation because the child's play skills are less sophisticated or because the child's behavior is unusual. Typically, children with disabilities are more likely to interact with peers during a structured play activity or when an adult is present to suggest play activities and facilitate playing together. However, when you cannot be available to facilitate interaction, children can be encouraged to interact with one another through careful arrangement of the environment.

The handout on interactions can help give you some ideas to encourage interactions. Perhaps you can think of others.

[HANDOUT: Interaction]

For older toddlers, many toys come with implied, and even written, directions. In fact, instructional toys are often designed around a particular direction or skill that is to be taught as children play with the toy. As you watch a group of young children at play, you may quickly see that they have a different plan in mind. Creativity is one of the most charming characteristics of children's play, and it is one that definitely needs to be nurtured and developed in all children, even very young children. Arranging the environment to encourage creativity actually strengthens children's play skills. When you allow, and even encourage, playing with toys and materials without defined rules or directions, you help children learn that their discoveries are important—even the ones that may appear silly to adults.

One of the best ways to describe the play environment that promotes creative play is that it ignores the rules (both the written and unwritten rules about the "right" way to play with a toy!). After all, even small babies will laugh at the adult who puts a stuffed animal on her head. The unexpectedness of the scene helps children understand creativity. That may sound a little strange, but it is an important concept to keep in mind when you want to create opportunities that allow and encourage children to play creatively, originally, and differently—to expand their ability to play with toys in nontraditional ways. An environment that promotes creativity actually shows children how a toy or material they are familiar with could be used in a new and unexpected way. Even something as small as stacking different types of blocks together could give the toddler "permission" to use the blocks in a different way. You can often tell that you are successful by children's expressions of surprise when they come upon these arranged play scenes. The handout about creativity may give you some more ideas or spark some new, creative ones of your own!
[HANDOUT: Creativity]

Using the environment to suggest play ideas to young children is probably not an entirely new concept to you. Many professional development workshops and courses for early childhood professionals address the importance of the environment and its impact on young children's learning. What may be new to you, however, is the concept of using the environment to send concrete messages to children about how to initiate and maintain certain play behaviors so that they learn to look for environmental cues instead of relying on you for directions.

While these strategies may be especially beneficial for children whose play skills are limited either because they are very young, new to group settings, or have a developmental delay or disability, these are not the only children who benefit from a carefully arranged environment. These strategies are especially useful for promoting child-initiated and child-directed play. Every child benefits from being given opportunities to practice and develop these skills.

Schedules and Routines

Children appreciate the security of routine. This does not mean that each and every day is the same; flexibility is important. However, children should be able to expect and anticipate a particular routine every day. This may be particularly true for children with certain disabilities. A child who has trouble transitioning may be more comfortable knowing what is coming up next.

However, flexibility is very important when accommodating for children with disabilities. Obviously, a child with motor delays will need more time to transition between activities. How can you make this delay more interesting for all the children? Rather than saying, “Helen needs a bit more time; let’s wait,” you could offer an activity while the time is extended.

In addition, there should be reasons for scheduling and routines. Do they meet the needs of the children? Are the days well divided between quiet and active play? Group and individual activities? Teacher initiated and child initiated play? All children, including those with disabilities, should be offered choices.

It’s important that all children are allowed enough time to complete activities so that they do not become frustrated. It’s also important to “cap” the time so that children do not become bored. Time frames may need to be modified to meet the needs of children who have differing abilities. As the care provider, it is important that you understand the children in your classroom and what their abilities are in order to allow sufficient time for activities.

Toys and Play Materials

Think of a toy you enjoyed as you were growing up. Perhaps it was a doll that you carried everywhere, a tricycle that allowed an extra bit of freedom, or a game that was played over and over again. As you think about favorite toys from your past, it quickly becomes apparent that the object itself was not as important as what that object allowed you to do. A child can use a doll to
explore feelings by making the doll "cry" or learn about caregiving by dressing and feeding the
doll. Toys are tools which help children explore their world and learn more about it.

When you think about toys, you might immediately think of the items found on the shelves in a
toy store. It is true, these are definitely toys, but the terms "toys" and "play materials" refer to a
wide variety of materials that help young children explore their world. Some of the best play
materials are not even found in a toy store! In the broadest sense, "toy" means anything that a
child uses as a tool to discover the world. While it might be a commercially made toy that is
designed, packaged, and sold as a plaything, a toy can be just about anything—a set of mixing
bowls, a box filled with old clothes, scraps of wood, or fabric. A set of wooden spoons, an old
typewriter, a set of potholders, or a pile of hats and mittens all have one thing in common; they
are potential play materials!

There are many things to consider when purchasing a toy or other play materials.

- Does it fit with your philosophy?

By having opportunities to play with toys and play materials that fit your program goals, children
are more likely to engage in play experiences that are meaningful and productive. If a toy is not a
good match with your ideas of what should happen in an early childhood program, it may create
play situations that make you uncomfortable. For example, a program that fosters independence
would welcome toys and play materials that encourage self-direction and allow children to freely
explore, such as child sized equipment and safe play materials. In an infant room, that
independence might be encouraged by creating some physical barriers that a child must figure
out. For instance, perhaps the blocks are on the other side of the floor balance beam. The child
must decide to crawl over or go around. Either way, he is learning independence by doing this
without teacher help.

Since inclusion of young children with disabilities is an important part of your program, the toys
you select should celebrate diversity of all kinds, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and ability. You
might consider adding materials like dolls with various skin colors, or posters, music and books
that explore cultural diversity. Even a set of crayons or paints with tones reflecting different skin
colors can be useful in setting up an environment that considers diversity. Glasses without lenses
can be added to the dramatic play area and some real life physical helpers could be added if
available, such as a child sized walker.

- Is it durable for the kinds of play experiences you expect from your group?

Durability is a major factor in selecting toys for group care. However, most toys are made for use
in the home where one or two children may play with them. A toy that is durable under these
conditions may last a short time in a group program where twelve children play. For this reason,
it is wise to select toys that will hold up under play conditions typical in your group.

- Is it easy to clean?
Having toys that can be easily cleaned and disinfected can make your job easier and, at the same time, create an environment that protects the health of the children in your care, especially children who may be vulnerable to disease and infection.

- Is it safe for the children in your group?

Early childhood professionals need to make sure the toys they select are safe. Toys that might pass a safety test for an older child are not necessarily safe for a younger child, a child with poor coordination, or a child with immature play skills. In programs that include children of different ages and ability levels together, it is imperative that toys are safe for all of the children. Toys that are not appropriate for the youngest children in the group must be arranged to give older children access without compromising the safety of others.

Here are some important safety considerations to keep in mind:

- Use toys and materials that are nontoxic,
- For children less than three years of age, avoid toys with small parts or parts that can break off easily. EVERYTHING should pass a choke tube test! This is particularly true of a classroom where there are children with differing abilities. Some children with a cognitive delay may put things in their mouths, even at an age when their typically developing peer would not.
- Be sure edges are smooth with no sharp objects or poorly conditioned wood,
- Imagine the different ways the children in your group may play with the toy; does it appear safe for all of these uses?
- Remove strings and cords that are long enough to pose a strangulation hazard, and
- Do regular safety checks and repair or remove broken or frayed toys and materials.

- Can it be used for different kinds of play?

When selecting toys, look for toys that fill multiple gaps in your program. If you know that you need both soft, cuddly toys and a greater variety of animals for children to use in dramatic play schemes, purchasing six teddy bears will not meet both needs. Six different animals - perhaps animals that are not already represented in your program (such as a mountain goat, snake, or ferret) - would enrich the play opportunities.

- Can parts be repaired or replaced?

Reputable companies often offer to replace parts of toys or to repair their products when broken. Even though these items may cost more initially, toys are worth the extra expense if they last longer and can be easily repaired and replaced.

- Does it incorporate different senses?

Young children learn through seeing, tasting, touching, hearing, and smelling, yet many commercially available toys only feature sight or sound. Incorporating different senses into play is particularly important for young children with sensory disabilities. A child with a significant visual impairment depends on smelling, touching, and hearing to make sense of her surroundings. This is why it is important that a conscious effort be made to include toys and play
materials that strengthen these senses. You may have a number of different types of blocks, for
example, but you will notice more exploration if one type is scented. Scented blocks are more
likely to be incorporated into dramatic play activities and have a different appeal for children
who do not have sophisticated building skills. Additional sensory input increases the likelihood
that young children will fully explore the toy.

- Can children play with it independently?

For children who have disabilities, the opportunity for independent play may be compromised
because of limitations in development. Children who have limited movement, for example, may
not be able to play independently in the same ways that another child might. It may be
challenging, at first, to find toys that nurture independence for these children. If your program
includes children whose play skills are limited by their disabilities, you may want to select toys
and materials with these children in mind. Your learning centers and activity areas may need to
be evaluated and additional materials added to address a wider range of abilities. While a sand
table is a great addition to any program, a tray with a low rim could serve as the sand table when
your program includes a child who does not have the motor skills to stand and play at the sand
table, and sand activities must be placed on the floor or the wheelchair tray.

- Does it promote interaction between children?

Remember that very young children do not play with one another, although they do interact at
various levels. Children with immature social skills or children who need encouragement to
interact, benefit from exposure to natural, nurturing, interactive play. Playing with peers gives
children opportunities to learn how to succeed in this type of play experience.

This handout may help you when you are choosing toys for your center. Use the checklist to
think of toys that will be appropriate for all children, including those with disabilities.

[HANDOUT: Selecting Toys]

A Child Ready Environment

The Child-Ready Checklist is designed especially for early childhood professionals who want a
fresh perspective on their early childhood environment. Completing the Checklist can help you
make the activities and routines in your program available and inviting to each child currently
enrolled in your program. The Child-Ready Checklist has two sections: the Checklist which
literally guides you on a walk through your play areas as if you were a child and the
Implementation Plan which helps you plan what changes need to be made, how to best make
them, and set target dates for their completion. The Checklist helps you look closely at the
following areas of your program:

- Greeting,
- Snack or mealtime,
- Fine motor and manipulative play,
- Gross motor toys and equipment,
• Outdoor play,
• Dramatic play,
• Block play,
• Creative play,
• Quiet play, and
• Diaper changing or bathroom facilities.

Before you can get started, please identify a child who is uniquely challenged by the physical arrangement of your child care environment. This will be a child whose perspective you are trying to grasp. Try to pick a child who has distinct needs and interests. It does not matter whether the child has intellectual and/or physical challenges, is a boy or a girl, an infant or toddler, and whether she is new to your program or has been enrolled for some time. The following examples of children other providers have chosen may help you choose the child you will use as you complete the checklist.

• A two-year-old recently enrolled in the program. This child has Down syndrome and mild speech and motor delays. She seldom plays with other children.
• An infant who is very outgoing and the provider is interested in offering him a wide variety of challenging developmental activities.
• A one-year-old who has cerebral palsy and is unable to walk or crawl. Her play is affected by limited motor skills, and the provider has difficulty including her in activities throughout the day.

The Checklist will be most helpful if you select a child who is currently, or about to be, enrolled in your program or group. If you have specific concerns about meeting the needs of a particular child, you may want to choose that child. Record a brief description of the child you have selected in the space provided on the cover of the Checklist. Include age, disability (if applicable), any concerns you have about the child's development, recent observations, and other information that would help you describe the child.

The Child-Ready Checklist is divided into sections that correspond to areas of a typical family child care home, preschool program, or child care center. If these areas do not reflect the arrangement of your program, you can modify the Checklist to suit the physical arrangement of your space. Try to answer the item even if you do not have the designated play spaces identified on the Checklist. For example, if you do not have a specific block play area, consider the places where children have the opportunity to play with blocks throughout the day and respond to the "BLOCK PLAY" items with that area in mind.

Choose a time when your program is set up for play as if the children were expected at any moment. Early morning before anyone arrives is an ideal time. With the child you have selected in mind, physically walk through the play areas. Pretend to be that particular child and look at the area from the level that he or she experiences it. Be especially sensitive to what the child can see, reach, and explore. Answer every item as it relates to the needs of that child. Allow approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

[HANDOUT: Child-Ready Checklist]
Modifications for Specific Disabilities – Learning Disabilities

In this course, we do not have time to discuss every childhood disability. However, there are some more common disabilities that you might see in children who will be, or who are currently enrolled in your program.

Let’s start with learning, or intellectual, disabilities. Children with intellectual disabilities generally go through the same developmental stages as children without disabilities; however, they may learn certain skills much more slowly. Don't lower your expectations of a child with an intellectual disability! Assume they can do whatever it is they need to learn. However, children with intellectual disabilities need more practice and that takes time and patience. Don't give up on them because they don't get it right the first, second, or third time. It's like they are learning in slow motion – they will get there, eventually. Creating a learning program that is sensitive to the learning needs of all children is the best way to ensure that children with intellectual disabilities have opportunities to learn.

If you are working with children who have intellectual disabilities, here are some ways to ensure that your child care curriculum helps all children learn at their own rates.

Keep things simple.

- Choose activities that children with different abilities can do at different levels. You might set up a puzzle area that includes small puzzles, large puzzles, puzzles with only a few pieces, and puzzles with more complex designs. Materials such as play dough or blocks can be used by children of all ages and abilities.
- Include activities that match the age and ability of children with learning disabilities. Shorten activities to match the child’s attention span.
- Break activities into small steps. Children with learning disabilities may need to see or hear one step at a time, instead of a long list of instructions.
- Provide opportunities for children to practice activities over and over. All children enjoy doing familiar activities sometimes, and children with learning disabilities may need more practice to master a new skill.

Demonstrate how to do things.

- Show and tell children how to do something. If needed, guide hands and body through the motions of an activity. As children become more competent, encourage them to do more and more of the activity themselves.
- Provide opportunities to play near a child who is doing a similar activity. This can give a child with learning disabilities ideas on how to use and explore the same materials.

Adapt learning activities.
• Make sure there are obvious differences in size, shape and color when sorting or classifying objects. Subtle differences between red and maroon or circles and ovals can be confusing.
• Limit the number of materials or toys to avoid overwhelming the child with choices.
• Announce ahead of time when an activity is about to change or end. Children with learning disabilities may need more time to make transitions between activities.
• Finally, give simple instructions before a transition to make moving to the next activity easier. [eXtension, 2014]

**Modifications for Specific Disabilities – Down syndrome**

Another common disability is Down syndrome - a condition in which a person has an extra chromosome. Chromosomes are small “packages” of genes in the body. They determine how a baby’s body forms during pregnancy and how the baby’s body functions as it grows in the womb and after birth. Typically, a baby is born with 46 chromosomes. Babies with Down syndrome have an extra copy of one of these chromosomes, chromosome 21. Down syndrome is generally diagnosed before or shortly after birth.

Just as in the normal population, there is a wide variation in mental abilities, behavior, and developmental progress in individuals with Down syndrome. Their level of intellectual disability may range from mild to severe, with the majority functioning in the mild to moderate range. Because children with Down syndrome differ in ability, it’s important that child care providers place few limitations on their potential capabilities and possible achievements.

Each child with Down syndrome has her own talents and unique capacities, and it’s important to recognize these and reinforce them. In many important ways, children who have Down syndrome are very much the same as other children and enjoy the same challenges and activities as their typically developing peers.

When it comes to children with Down syndrome, focus on the individual child and learn firsthand what needs and capabilities he has. Realize that you can make a big difference in this child’s life! Use her abilities and interests to involve and motivate her. Give lots of opportunities for her to be successful.

Be as concrete as possible with the child. Demonstrate what you want to see happen instead of giving only verbal instructions. When you share concrete information verbally, also show a photograph. Give the child practical materials and experiences and the opportunity to touch and examine objects.

For older toddlers, divide new tasks and/or large tasks into smaller steps. Demonstrate the steps and have the child do the steps, one by one. Offer help when necessary and give the child immediate, concrete feedback.

**Modifications for Specific Disabilities – Speech and Hearing Impairments**
Speech impairment is another common disability seen in young children. IDEA defines speech impairment in the following way:

“Speech or language impairment means a communication disorder, such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance.” [34 CFR §300.8(c)(11]

It is very difficult to diagnose speech or language impairments in very young children. The primary language concern in toddlers is language delay. It’s important to realize that a speech delay isn’t the same thing as a speech or language impairment. Language delay is a very common developmental problem—in fact, the most common, affecting 5-10% of children in preschool. With language delay, children’s language is developing in the expected sequence, only at a slower rate. In contrast, speech and language disorder refers to abnormal language development.

If a young child has been diagnosed with a speech or language impairment, the IFSP will reflect this and you will use this document to plan activities for him.

Perhaps a child with a hearing loss enters your program. IDEA defines two types of hearing loss:

Hearing impairment is defined by IDEA as “an impairment in hearing, whether permanent or fluctuating, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance.” Deafness is defined as “a hearing impairment that is so severe that the child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification.”

Thus, deafness is viewed as a condition that prevents an individual from receiving sound in all or most of its forms. In contrast, a child with a hearing loss can generally respond to auditory stimuli, including speech.

Recognizing the importance of early detection, the CDC recommends that every newborn be screened for hearing loss as early as possible, usually before they leave the hospital. Catching hearing loss early means that treatment can start early as well and “help the child develop communication and language skills that will last a lifetime.”

Please take a few moments to complete a short quiz on hearing loss provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (the CDC).

[ACTIVITY: Hearing Loss Quiz]

How can you help the child in your care who has a hearing loss?

• Cut down on background noise. Turn off music and choose a quiet place for activities that require the child with a hearing disability to listen and communicate. The other children in your care will not suffer any loss from having less background music. On the other hand, when it is music time, even children with hearing loss can often feel the beat of the music and enjoy dancing along with the other children.
• **Absorb sound.** Use carpets, drapes, pillows and other soft material to absorb excess sound. Avoid hard floors or break them up with rugs. Remember that cribs cannot have these soft elements.

• **Use pictures.** Label shelves with a picture of toys to make cleanup easier. Post pictures to show hand washing steps or steps of a recipe during cooking activities. Lastly,

• **Adapt learning activities to include children with hearing loss.** Provide earphones for children to listen to stories and music at a higher volume.


**Modifications for Specific Disabilities – Visual Impairment**

Let’s now turn our attention to visual impairment, yet another common disability seen in young children. IDEA provides the nation with definitions of many disabilities that can make children eligible for special education and related services in schools. Visual impairment is one such disability that the law defines as follows:

**Visual impairment including blindness…**

...means an impairment in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child’s educational performance. The term includes both partial sight and blindness. [§300.8(c)(13)]

You may find that you have young children in your care who have vision problems. It’s very important to diagnose and address visual impairment in children as soon as possible. Some vision screening may occur at birth, especially if the baby is born prematurely or there’s a family history of vision problems, but baby wellness visits as early as six months should also include basic vision screening to ensure that the child’s eyes are developing and functioning typically. The child care setting can be a confusing place for children with visual disabilities. While they can do virtually all the activities and tasks that sighted children take for granted, children who are visually impaired often need to learn to do them in a different way or using different tools or materials.

Children who cannot see well are sometimes delayed in developing physical and motor skills. They may have trouble locating or picking up small objects that have been dropped. They may spill things or bump into objects. Child care providers can help children with visual disabilities succeed in the child care setting. Children who cannot see well often learn through other senses, such as hearing and touching. You can help by providing children with many different ways to explore and learn. Hands are a primary information-gathering tool for children with visual impairments. So are the senses of smell, touch, taste, and hearing. Until the child holds the “thing” to be learned and explores its dimensions—for example, a stuffed animal, a dog, or a salt shaker—he or she cannot grasp its details. That is why sensory learning is so powerful for children with visual impairment and why they need to have as many opportunities as possible to experience objects directly and through use of their senses. Helping children understand about space and size will also support their development.
Make it easy to move around. Arrange your classroom for safe and free movement. Provide plenty of open space. Keep doors and cabinets closed so children do not trip over them. Place sound-making objects, such as clocks, wind chimes, or a radio, in different parts of the child care center so that children can link these sounds to certain areas. Encourage children to listen to the sounds to help learn their way around. Help children use textures such as tile, carpet, wood, glass windows, plastered walls and marble counter tops to locate different areas of the building. Keep the space organized so children can find things easily. Place toys and materials in the same place every day and set up specific areas for play activities and routines. Help children become familiar with the room arrangement, and try not to change it often.

Make it easier to see.

- Use good lighting to help children see better,
- Add large visual cues for centers and play areas,
- Choose toys and materials in contrasting colors. For example, it is easier to see objects in blue and yellow than objects in similar shades of red and orange,
- Label items with large letters and pictures,
- Label toy shelves by taping raised cardboard labels with pictures of specific toys onto the shelves. These labels will make it easier for children to return toys during cleanup, and
- Use blocks that have a different color for each size.

Use words and speak out loud more. Use electronic "talking books" or recorded books so that children are able to imagine the visuals for the story. Expand children’s learning by talking to them during activities. This is particularly important for infants and toddlers who are just learning how to use speech. Use descriptive words such as long, short, over, under, big and little. Whenever possible, provide real experiences that show these important ideas. You can also offer words that call to other senses, such as “Do you smell our lunch?”, “Do you hear the bird singing? That’s a robin”, or “Isn’t the bunny soft? And his ears are so long!”

Encourage learning through touch for all children. Look for toys and books with raised numerals, letters, or designs that children can touch and explore. Stock the room with materials that help, such as magnifiers and wide crayons and markers. Encourage children to build with blocks horizontally so that children with visual disabilities can feel shapes and lay blocks end-to-end or in different patterns without the frustration of falling blocks. Follow up read-aloud stories with concrete experiences. For example, after reading The Three Little Pigs, have children identify straw, sticks and bricks by feeling them but not looking at them. Cut out symbols, shapes, letters and numbers from sandpaper or card board. Guide fingers over these shapes as you discuss them. Show older toddlers how to make rubbings by coloring over an interesting texture.

Teach other children how to interact with children who have visual disabilities.

- Encourage children to use the child’s name,
- Teach children to use more words to describe what they want. For example, instead of saying “Come over here to play,” say, “Come over to the playhouse and play dolls with Maddie and me.”,
- Help children practice saying the specific names of objects such as a phone, hat or car, rather than using words like "this," "it" or "that.", and
• Encourage children to describe their art activities or block buildings in words to children with visual disabilities.

Modifications for Specific Disabilities – Physical Disabilities

Working with children who have physical disabilities requires thoughtful planning for child care providers. Children with physical disabilities need different types and amounts of assistance and support in order to participate fully in their child care program. Child care providers who are including a child, particularly an infant or toddler, with a physical disability need to get input from the parents and the professionals working with the child. By studying the ISFP and visiting with the persons involved in creating it, child care providers can have an educated plan for adaptations for this child.

Help Children Be Independent

Children with physical disabilities are children first. Like all children, they need opportunities to make choices and do things for themselves, within the limits of their ability. Resist the temptation to do everything for the child. Provide appropriate help, but encourage children to try to do things themselves. This may mean that tasks and chores could take a little more time. Remember that doing things independently helps children build self-confidence. Provide encouragement and patience, and help the other children do the same.

Make it easy to move around in play areas.

• Use heavy, stable furniture and equipment that cannot be easily knocked over (for infants and toddlers, furnishings should be at a minimum),
• Remove rugs that can be tripped over, or tape them down,
• Arrange furniture and equipment with a wide aisle so children can move around more freely,
• Provide a safe place for walkers and wheelchairs so other children do not trip over them, and
• Work with parents to find comfortable ways for a child to sit. A corner with two walls for support, a chair with a seat belt, or a wheelchair with a large tray across the arms are three possibilities that may help children with certain physical disabilities participate more fully in child care activities.

Adapt learning activities.

• Provide tools that children with motor disabilities can use for grasping, holding, transferring and releasing,
• Be sure objects are age-appropriate,
• Provide materials of different textures -- such as play dough for toddlers, fabric swatches or “touch blankets”, or ribbon to stimulate the sense of touch,
• Be sure activity areas are well-lighted. Add lamps if needed,
• Plan activities to encourage all children to move all body parts. Work with parents and specialists to choose special exercises for the child, and encourage the whole class to do some of them as part of a large group activity,
• Add tabs to books for turning pages,
• Place tape on crayons and markers to make them easier to grip. Use wide crayons and markers,
• Provide spray bottles to practice the squeezing motion needed to use scissors,
• Keep items contained. Roll a ball inside a hula hoop placed on the floor. Play with blocks on a cookie sheet or the lid of a cardboard box, and
• Add tabletop easels so that a child who cannot easily stand can be seated while painting or drawing.

Teach classmates how to help a child with a physical disability.
• Playmates are usually eager to assist children with disabilities, but may take over and provide too much help. Applaud and encourage helping behaviors, but also teach children to encourage their classmate to do as much as possible on his own.
• Teach children how to offer help respectfully. Encourage them to ask if the child wants help first, and to take "no" as an answer.
• Finally, encourage children to find creative ways to include a child with a physical disability in their play activities. For example, moving blocks to a table might make it easier for a child in a wheelchair to participate.

Conclusion

This course has provided you with some important information about creating an inclusive environment for infants and toddlers. All children can benefit from having children in the program who are developing in a different way. You have learned how to use an IFSP to create individualized plans for children. You have learned some messages and activities that can ensure that all young children, including those with disabilities, receive the full benefits of their time in your care. In addition, you have been given some ideas about environmental, materials, and activities modifications suitable for infants and toddlers, including those with disabilities.

• Remember that infants and toddlers with disabilities are still infants and toddlers, just like their peers in almost every way. They are young children who want to live, learn, and enjoy their day.
• Careful observation will allow you to modify, as necessary, and individualize all learning for the children in your care.
• While there are some modifications needed to ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn, most modifications do not require a great deal of work or expense. Generally, the environment, materials, and activities can be easily modified to include all children, including those with differing abilities.
• Finally, your knowledge and experience can help all children reach their full developmental potential.

Your work with young children is vital and you are a key influence in their young lives. Thank you for your attention and your dedication to working with young children in inclusive settings.
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