



Inclusion of Children with Additional Needs

Self-Guided Learning Package

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About Self-Guided Learning Packages

Self-Guided Learning Packages can be completed in your own time and convenience and offer an alternative to attending training sessions. This package aims to develop skills and knowledge that will be valuable to you in providing quality education and care programs. Packages are often used for professional development by staff teams, networks and other groups of children's services professionals. You can work through the package with colleagues by reading the package together, discussing the information and collaborating to complete the one assessment task.

Gowrie Victoria Leadership and Learning Consultants are available to support you while working through the package. Feel free to phone or email if you require any assistance completing the tasks within the package. Phone 1800 103 670 (freecall) or (03) 9347 6388 or email psc@gowrievictoria.org.au

Introduction

'The term 'inclusion' has traditionally been used to describe bringing children with disabilities into regular settings rather than placing them in 'special' facilities' (Connor, 2006, p8). This concept and practice is far removed from earlier beliefs and practices of placing children with additional needs in institutions or segregated services, or expecting them to 'fit into' mainstream programs where their 'differences' could be 'fixed' in order to make them more 'normal'.

The Early Years Learning Framework and the Framework for School Age Care suggest that *inclusion involves taking into account all children's social, cultural and linguistic diversity (including learning styles, abilities, disabilities, gender, family circumstances and geographic location) in curriculum-decision making processes. The intent is to ensure that all children's experiences are recognised and valued, and that all children have equitable access to resources and participation, and opportunities to demonstrate their learning and to value difference (EYLF p24 & FSAC p22)*

This self-guided learning package will allow you to consider and reflect on your ideas, beliefs and attitudes about diversity and inclusion, providing reflective questions to assist you to feel more informed and confident including children with additional needs in the future. Specifically it will address:

- Barriers to inclusion – obstacles that can sometimes get in the way
- Family-centered practice – what does it mean and what does it look like
- Accessing support – how and why of additional support options

The Commonwealth Government of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR, 2010) use the term 'Inclusion indicator' for statistical purposes on children's enrolments, which are separated into the following areas of need:

- **Indigenous Indicator** – this is based on a family's self-identification. The commonly accepted definition is that the person is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent; identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and is accepted as such by the community in which they live.
- **Disability Indicator** – this is based on the child's underlying long-term health condition or disability which presents the need for additional assistance compared to children of a similar age in areas of: learning and applying knowledge, education; communication; mobility; self care; interpersonal interactions and relationships; and others including general tasks, domestic life, community and social life. This does not include children with a medical condition that is short term or episodic such as asthma, allergies, eczema or infectious diseases.
- **Special Needs Indicator** – this is based on the child's priority grouping: children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; children with a refugee background who have been subject to trauma; indigenous children; the child's place has been sought by a state or territory child protection worker; the child is in the care of the state, or other forms of out of home care.

The use of these descriptors, or any label however, should be used with caution to ensure that assumptions are not made about children and their families on the basis of a label alone. Labelling a child by their needs ignores other important aspects of the child's identity. It also suggests that all people with the same need are part of a homogenous group.

For the purpose of this self guided learning package, the term 'additional needs' will be used to refer to children with a diagnosed or undiagnosed disability and developmental delay.

Self Help Question 1

What does including a child with an additional need mean to you?

What ideas, theories and experiences have influenced your definition?

Has your definition changed over time? How? Why?

Barriers to Inclusion

The history of inclusion is relatively short. Changing views about children, children's rights, and education and care, have contributed to changing attitudes and practices on this issue.

While the benefits of inclusion are becoming more widely acknowledged, there are a number of barriers to inclusion that need to be considered. Being aware of such barriers is an important step in becoming clear about your goals for the future and what you can do to address your most pressing issues or challenges relating to inclusive practice.

Such barriers include:

- Discriminatory attitudes and behaviours of educators, children, families and the community in general
- Inadequate or insufficient access to information and resources
- Minimum licensing requirements: This can put pressure on children's services to have the capacity to respond to a diverse range of needs and capacities with minimum resources
- A lack of available places in child care services is a significant barrier for families seeking to access a place for their child
- Insufficient support for educators, for example insufficient planning time
- Limited prior experience and training can cause educators to lack confidence in their ability to include a child with additional needs
- Limited access to resources and equipment necessary for a child with additional needs can restrict a services' capacity to successfully include the child
- Limited availability and access to government funding to gain support when they cannot be accessed through other means

Self Help Question 4

Select one of the above listed barriers to inclusion that stands out or is significant for you. Talk to some colleagues and/or friends to brainstorm strategies to address this issue. Write these strategies below:

Some additional restricting factors which can inhibit inclusion include:

Child with an additional need

- Difficulty accessing and participating in particular activities
- Difficulty communicating needs and wants with adults and peers
- Difficulty developing relationships and friendships with peers
- Behaviours misunderstood and/or misinterpreted by others, resulting in frustration and distress
- A potential victim of discriminatory words and actions, impacting on the child's sense of belonging and positive sense of self

The Child's family

- Feeling anxious and afraid of the reactions of educators at the children's service, and other children and families
- Grieving over the child's diagnosed disability and/or reluctance to acknowledge their child's additional needs
- Reluctance to share full information about their child due to previous negative experiences and/or fear they may be rejected or excluded again
- Advocacy role interpreted as demanding and/or 'difficult'

Other Children

- Confused or frightened by the child's behaviour, appearance and/or specialist equipment needs
- Curiosity – asking questions, wanting to try the child's equipment
- May taunt or tease the child because of their differences

Other Families

- Concerned their child will miss out because of educators' attention to the child with additional needs
- Concerned their child may be injured because of the actions of the child with additional needs
- Apprehension about the impact on their children, for example, imitating behaviours of the child
- Discriminatory beliefs and attitudes. For example, some families may believe children with additional needs should be in 'special' services
- Unable or reluctant to express their concerns or fears with educators

Educators

- May feel inexperienced and lack confidence
- May have no specific training and/or limited knowledge
- May feel anxious and fearful, particularly with children with high and ongoing support needs

Educators recognise and respond to barriers to children achieving educational success. In response they challenge practices that contribute to inequities and make curriculum decisions that promote inclusion and participation of all children. By developing their professional knowledge and skills, and working in partnership with children, families, communities, other services and agencies, they continually strive to find equitable and effective ways to ensure that all children have opportunities to achieve learning outcome (EYLF, p14)

Strategies to support inclusion

‘Inclusion ...in typical early childhood programs has value for all children. It has the potential for many positive outcomes, and doing it with thoughts and preparation will assist in ensuring its success’ (Chandler, 1994, p8).

This successful inclusion of children with additional needs in children’s services is dependent on a number of factors. This includes educators:

- Believing in the underlying value of inclusion
- Understanding their feelings about children with additional needs and inclusion
- Planning for inclusion, carefully preparing themselves and the environment
- Providing support for the child as needed
- Assisting all children in the inclusion process
- Providing support to the child’s family and to the other families
- Closely collaborating with other agencies and professionals

Getting started

We can’t possibly know about every potential condition or factor that can impact on a child’s learning and development. Nor is this necessarily helpful. There are however, some important factors to consider when working with children with additional needs.

Children with additional needs - like all children - are very different from one another. Even children with the same diagnosis will have varying abilities and needs, and their learning and development may be influenced by a number of factors.

Just because you have worked with a child with Autism in the past doesn’t mean the abilities, needs and interests of another child with Autism will be the same as the first child. Rather than focusing on the label alone - and your knowledge of the label – remember to get to know this child in the same way that you would all other children.

It is imperative that you spend time getting to know the child, and speaking with the child’s family. This will give you the most useful information required to ensure you are on the right track in the early stages of making inclusion happen. Talking with other professionals involved (with family permission) can also be a very helpful exercise.

It is also important to ensure that a child’s diagnosis does not unduly impact on your image and/or expectations of the child. The child is an individual and it is not possible to predict their future functioning or potential on the basis of a label alone. *‘Early childhood educators who are committed to equity believe in all children’s capacities to succeed, regardless of diverse circumstances and abilities’ (EYLF, p12)*

Rather than placing undue emphasis on what an assessment report might say about a child, trust in your skills and expertise in working with children and getting to know them in the way that you would with other children. This does not mean discarding the report altogether or not reading up on a particular disability as it relates to a child you will be working with. It does mean taking care not to let this information alone influence the way you think about, respond to and plan for the child.

In the same way, identifying and knowing the cause of a disability or delay does not result in precise educational and care practices. While knowing the cause may be relevant to the family it is not always helpful in determining educational programs. In children's services, it is generally more relevant to base your planning on the child's current or emerging abilities, strengths and interests and the goals and priorities identified by the family.

Self Help Question 6

List the strategies you have found successful in helping you get to know and understand the children in your program?

What additional strategies and/or information has helped you get to know and more effectively include children with additional needs?

Using the correct terminology is important. Even today, some children with additional needs are labelled on the basis of their ability - or disability - alone. Labelling a child in this way focuses only on one aspect of the child and ignores other important aspects of their identity, for example their culture and gender. Further, it tends to focus more on what is perceived to be wrong rather than on existing strengths and emerging skills.

It is important to remain aware that first and foremost the child is a child, with a unique and individual personality, temperament, capacities, strengths and interests, just like every other child. Care should also be taken to avoid words that suggest pity and sympathy and reinforce stereotypes and generalisations based on a child's label rather than our knowledge of that child.

We can be inspired by the philosophies of the educators in Reggio Emilia (Italy) who use the term 'special rights' to refer to children with disabilities, recognising that all children have the right to access the full range of resources and support required to reach their potential.

Various ways of discouraging negative attitudes and stereotypes are described by Palmer. These include

- Avoid negative terms like 'victim' and 'suffers from'
- Use honest and objective language
- Completely avoid labels unless pertinent to the situation

- Use children’s names rather than labeling by differences
- Use general terms such as ‘has a disability’ or ‘has additional needs’
- Ask the child and family their preferences regarding terminology (1998, p2)

While information and training is helpful, what matters most is what you believe and how you behave. When working with children with additional needs it is important that you reflect on your attitudes, values and beliefs about difference and differing abilities in order to ensure they do not impact negatively on your actions and behaviours, and your relationships with children and families.

Self Help Question 5

Change the following statements using inclusive wording:

‘We have a little Down’s girl who comes on Mondays’

‘We’ll be having a wheelchair boy starting at the centre next month’

Getting More Specific

Some specific strategies to support inclusion are:

For the child with additional needs

- Encourage the child and family to visit the service for short periods prior to enrolling
- Use your enrolment and orientation procedures as an opportunity to find out all you need to know about the child, for example, their needs, interests, abilities, sense of humour, learning style, cultural background, communication preferences, likes and dislikes, etc.
- Do an audit of your physical environment to ensure the child is able to access and participate fully in all aspects of the program
- Ask your Inclusion Support Facilitator (ISF) to sit down with you to help you develop a plan of action detailing what you need to do, know and have to support the child’s inclusion in the program
- Invest time getting to know the child and building a positive relationship with them – just as you do with all children
- Don’t feel you have to do things differently just because a child has additional needs. Recognise and build on the child’s strengths, abilities and interests, just as you would with other children
- Ensure children with additional needs have opportunities to see positive images of themselves in their environment, for example through photographs, posters and picture books and so on
- As educators, talk as a team about your individual and shared responsibilities in supporting this child and all other children

For the Child's family

- Invest time in building a trusting relationship with the family so they feel accepted, respected and valued
- Treat the family as your prime consultants and acknowledge them as experts in their child
- Ask the family about their goals and expectations for their child, and talk with them about how you can work together to make them happen
- Ask the family how they would like to exchange two-way information in an ongoing capacity. Some may prefer written communication such as email or communication books, while others may prefer oral communication such as meetings or phone contact
- Some families may prefer that there is one educator that they communicate with rather than talking to everyone in the team (for centre-based services)

For other children

- Other children need honest answers to questions about diversity and difference. Children are naturally curious, and are generally satisfied with a simple and honest response
- Offer children explanations about what the child's behaviours might mean. This can help them to understand that something they interpret as 'naughty' is the child's way of communicating a basic need or desire
- Help other children to see and understand what they have in common with children with additional needs, rather than differences
- Avoid encouraging children to 'help' children with additional needs when it is not required. Instead, suggest that they ask if help is required and acknowledge that all children need opportunities to do things in their own way and time
- Ensure all children have opportunities to see positive images of themselves in their environment, for example through photographs, posters and picture books and so on
- Challenge stereotyped ideas and discriminatory behaviours where they occur and talk to children about the extent to which this is fair or unfair. Offer alternative ways of thinking about ability and diversity grounded in social justice
- Don't underestimate your influence as a role model to children in demonstrating respectful relationships and communication with others

For Other Families

- Ensure you have clear policies and procedures about inclusion and that relevant information is shared with families prior to enrolment. This gives you the opportunity to answer questions and respond to fears or concerns before they enrol in the service
- Explain the benefits of inclusion for all children including their own
- Consider and utilise a range of ways to address concerns and answer questions. This should be done with consideration and respect to the child with additional needs and their family

Self Help Question 7

Consider to following scenarios and describe how you would respond:

A parent complains about the amount of time she perceives is spent by educators with a child with additional needs. What could you do or say in this situation?

Educators

- Discuss and explore attitudes and address any concerns or fears about particular children, including those with additional needs
- Talk to therapists involved (with family permission) about routines, special equipment, adaptations to the physical environment etc. that may be helpful for you to know
- Obtain detailed written information about the child and family’s needs, strengths and goals, emergency contacts, medical requirements and so on. Share all relevant information with everyone who will be working with child
- Learn about the specific disability and the child’s particular requirements (positioning, toileting, sign language, etc.)
- Access the range of resources and support required for the child before the child commences. Your plan of action developed with support from your Inclusion Support Facilitator will help with this process
- Talk about your shared responsibilities in working with this child and all other children at the service. This is particularly important where an additional worker has been employed
- Set aside adequate time for ongoing reflection, evaluation and planning
- Actively seek out relevant professional learning opportunities to provide you with new knowledge and skills

A colleague is anxious about working with a child with additional needs, claiming “I have seen ‘those kinds of children on television and they are hard to manage”.

What could you do or say in this situation?

Where to access support

A good place to start is with your children’s service and your local community. The existing strengths and wealth of knowledge and expertise available through your colleagues, families and community services should not be underestimated.

There may be times when you determine you will require additional and/or external resources to include a child with additional needs. The role of the Inclusion Support Facilitator (ISF) is to help you feel more capable and confident to be responsive to all children and their families. This includes Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander children, children from cultural and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, and children with ongoing high support needs including children with a disability. Working in partnership with you, your ISF will talk to you about what is currently happening in your service and what you would like to see happening, i.e. your goals or vision for the future.

Additionally, your local ISF will assist you identify what you are already doing to identify and achieve your goals and determine any additional information, resources and supports that might help. This is then written into a plan – generally referred to as a Service Support Plan (SSP), which identifies the practical steps or actions you will take in order to achieve your goals.

Contact your local Inclusion Support Agency (ISA) and talk to an ISF about what they do and how they can assist you to meet your goals. There are seventeen ISAs in Victoria. Eight are located in the Melbourne metropolitan area and nine in regional Victoria. To find the ISA for your region contact Community Child Care on 1800 177 017 or visit their website at www.cccvic.org.au.

A number of other resources and support are also available through your state Professional Support Coordinator (PSC), the Community Child Care Resource and Development Unit.

The Community Child Care Resource and Development Unit provide a range of professional support services to eligible children’s programs to increase their capacity to provide high quality programs for all children. This includes training, bicultural support, specialist equipment, general resource library, phone support, web based and on-line resources and supports, fact sheets and newsletters.

Together with assistance provided from your ISF, this range of complimentary services provides you with responsive and relevant support to address your professional learning needs, including those that relate more specifically to inclusive practice.

Self Help Question 8

What other resources and support services exist in your local community? Identify one you haven’t used before and contact them in the next week to find out about the services they provide. Share this at your next team meeting.

Consider the following scenario:

You are the Director of a child care centre and receive a phone call from a parent seeking a place for her four-year-old son Jack, for three days per week. Jack has recently been diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome. You have some knowledge and experience working with children with other diagnoses on the Autism Spectrum, but never a child with Asperger’s Syndrome.

You feel a little nervous but are confident you can draw on your previous experiences and knowledge to make this work.

You have a couple of meetings with Jack’s family. At one of the meetings they bring Jack along so everyone has an opportunity to meet. You use the meetings as a way of getting the information you need to know before Jack starts. You ask the family about their goals and dreams for Jack. You talk to them about the things he is good at, his likes and dislikes, his learning style, communication preferences, and so on. The family also bring along a recent assessment report and some information

about Asperger's Syndrome, which they thought might help. The meetings also give you an opportunity to talk with the family about your program and what you can offer them, and to explore possibilities for working together.

You decide to give your ISF a call so you can develop a plan of action to identify what you will need to do when Jack commences at the service. You don't think you will require an additional worker, but having an action plan has helped in the past to ensure everyone knows what to do. You notice a couple of the staff seem a little anxious about Jack's enrolment so you also plan a staff meeting to address any concerns or fears they may have, and work together to come up with some solutions to overcome them.

So far so good! The information you have collected so far has been useful and you have a couple more meetings coming up, including one with your ISF and one with Jack's educator from local early intervention service. You have also noticed one of the upcoming workshops in the PSC training program is about including children with Autism Spectrum Disorder! You still have a couple of questions, such as how to talk with the existing children about Jack, but you will talk to his family about what they think might help with that.

Now let's visit how educators are going including Jack a few weeks down the track:

One of the actions identified for the service was to evaluate the environment to ensure that Jack had opportunities to participate and interact with the environment but also with his peers.

Educators spoke with Jack's family to get some ideas about how they might talk with the other children about Jack's behaviours and communication needs. This helped them to be more in tune with his intentions and respond more appropriately to his needs and wants.

Educators found out about some of the things that Jack enjoyed and was good at so they could ensure there was always something familiar and of interest to him on the days he attended. This helped to ensure that Jack was able to settle more easily when his mother left each morning and to settle him efficiently and quickly if he became distressed or anxious. It also gave the staff an opportunity to talk to children about the things they had in common with Jack rather than focusing on the things they were different.

Educators revisited their expectations for all children at group times so that they had a range of options if they weren't interested in the discussion or found the demands of sitting for long periods of time difficult. This not only helped Jack, but also a number of other children in the group.

Conclusion

The inclusion of children with additional needs in children's services has now become common practice in Australia, reflecting the rights of all children to equal access and full participation in children's programs and society as a whole.

While barriers to inclusion may sometimes still be apparent, research and practice wisdom has proven that the benefits are greater, not just for the child with additional needs, but for all involved both within and outside of the children's program. These benefits are realised within programs that meet recognised standards for high quality care and education and maintain a commitment to social justice principles of equity, participation and respect.

Children's service professionals help to achieve these benefits through positive attitudes and acknowledgement of diversity, careful planning and consideration of their curriculum and environment, respectful partnerships and collaboration with children, families and other professionals, and using strengths based approach to acknowledge and build on what is working well.

References

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Assessment Task

1. Talk with two people who are older than you about attitudes toward people with disabilities in the past. Describe any differences in terms of attitudes that may persist today.
2. List four obstacles to establishing and maintaining relationships and strong partnerships with families with children with additional needs. Provide one response to each of these four barriers.
3. Reflect on a time where you have thought about planning for, or effectively included a child in your service with an additional need. Identify one practice that has changed regarding the services' social environment, and one practice that has changed regarding the services physical environment.
4. At a recent staff meeting you are informed by your Director that a child with Down Syndrome will be commencing in a couple of months' time. The Director asks you to do some research to identify some possible resources and support services that might assist you to plan for this child's inclusion. List three potential supports that might help.
5. Going back to Jack's story, identify one strategy for each stakeholder below, on developing a partnership contributing to Jack's inclusion at the service.

How and why would you collaborate with:

- Jack
 - Jack's family
 - Other children at the service
 - Families of the other children at the service
 - Inclusion Support Facilitator
 - Early Intervention Service Educators/Medical Staff
 - Staff Team
 - Other Care Providers e.g. Kindergarten/School Teacher
6. Describe a previous experience where your service has cared for a child with additional needs. What did you find worked well to highlight the benefits of the inclusion of that child to other children and families?
 7. Reflecting on the content of this training package, identify one related issue or topic area you would like to learn more about. Write a brief action plan detailing the steps you will take to learn more about this topic.