Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children

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Position Statement

Adopted by the DEC and NAEYC Governing Boards in Summer 2026

Early Childhood Inclusion

A Joint Position Statement of the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

This position statement affirms that inclusion and rightful presence are not optional or supplemental—they are essential. It calls on each and every one of us to ensure that disabled children and their families are not only welcomed, but celebrated as vital members of the community of every early childhood space.

A Position Statement Held on Behalf of the Early Childhood Education Profession

Disponible en Español: NAEYC.org/position-statements

The "Early Childhood Inclusion" position statement is a public statement created by the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). It is aimed at forwarding the goal of rightful presence and full inclusion of each and every child with a disability and their families. We ground this statement in the vision and mission of both organizations with a focus on supporting each and every child to reach their full potential in a society that cultivates inclusion and belonging as a lived reality for all children. We commit to advancing inclusion through our daily actions, decisions, partnerships, and change.

This statement manifests a future that disrupts ableist systems, practices, and communities; a future where inclusion is not optional or supplemental, but essential. The responsibility toward this future is grounded in our field's shared commitments:

- The "Division for Early Childhood (DEC) Racial Equity Point of View" calls for systemic change to ensure that children and families of color, including those with disabilities, experience meaningful improvements in their lives.
- NAEYC's "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education" position statement emphasizes that all children have the right to equitable learning opportunities and that we must dismantle barriers that create unfair outcomes.
- The DEC "Position Statement on Ethical Practice" guides us to act with integrity, equity, and responsiveness in every interaction with children and families.
- NAEYC's "Code of Ethics for Early Childhood Educators" emphasizes the ethical decision making and behaviors that support each and every child's healthy development, learning, and well-being.
- NAEYC's "Developmentally Appropriate Practice" position statement emphasizes the importance of considering the commonality of children's learning and development; the individuality of children's strengths, needs, and experiences; and the cultural and social context of children, families, and educators.

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Taken together, these commitments remind us that inclusion is both an ethical obligation and a daily practice. It requires us to learn with and from people with disabilities and to center the voices and experiences of children with disabilities and their families. It also requires us to co-create learning environments where children with disabilities are valued and supported and to work collectively to confront the barriers that stand in the way of equity and belonging.

These commitments also remind us that inclusion is not simply a set of practices or a checklist—it is a stance that affirms the rightful presence of every child and family in our early childhood communities. For disabled children and their families, rightful presence means more than physically being in the same space at the same time. Our systems often treat children with disabilities as invited guests who gain value from being included rather than as members who belong and enrich our systems. This statement serves as a reminder of our shared responsibility to cultivate early learning settings and communities in which the identities of all young children are discussed, celebrated, and affirmed. This statement is also a call to action that promotes our collective responsibility to change the overwhelming exclusion of young children with disabilities from their learning communities. It aims to address particularly the experiences of disabled children who are most likely to be excluded: Disabled children from communities that are marginalized based on factors such as multilingualism, race, culture, socioeconomic status, and diverse family structures.

This position statement affirms that inclusion and rightful presence are not optional or supplemental. They are essential. It calls on each and every one of us to ensure that disabled children and their families are both welcomed and celebrated as vital members of the community of every early childhood space.

Throughout this statement, we use intentional language, such as with the word "disability." We are defining "disability" more broadly than as defined in the educational law. "Disability" includes anyone identified with a disability, developmental delay, or established condition. This is not only limited to those children identified under national and international laws and policies. We are including children who are not yet identified and those who have a disability and do not qualify for services under the law.

We know that there is discourse around the words we use to describe disability and inclusion. You will notice that we are using both person-first and identity-first language throughout the statement to reflect that the disability community does not have a standard way to refer to individuals with disabilities and that disabled people prefer different terms. However, we consistently use the word "disability" throughout this statement intentionally. We use it to honor disabled advocates who have worked to reclaim the word "disability," challenge ableism, and show pride in disability as an identity.

Definition

Early childhood inclusion refers to the rightful presence of each and every young child with a disability and their families in all early childhood education (ECE) environments. Inclusion emphasizes that young children with disabilities and their families have the right to belong within every early childhood environment, space, and community with their strengths affirmed and their needs supported.

> *Inclusion means intentionally providing equitable access to learning opportunities, implementing individualized supports that promote participation and engagement, fostering belonging for each and every child with a disability, and ensuring systems are designed with and for individuals with disabilities.*

Characteristics

There are four defining features of inclusion.



Access

Inclusion begins with ensuring that children and families can identify, enter, and sustain meaningful presence in a wide variety of high-quality early learning opportunities, activities, settings, and natural environments. Such spaces may have common or unique features; they can include Head Start and Early Head Start, early intervention sessions, center- and home-based childcare, faith-based programs, recreational programs, preschool, public and private prekindergarten through early elementary education, and blended early childhood education/early childhood special education programs.

While there are many places in which inclusion occurs and many ways to implement inclusion in these spaces, inclusion is facilitated by children's physical and social environments. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is one educational framework that guides organizations in removing physical and structural barriers and creating more flexible spaces and learning opportunities to support a wide variety of learners. UDL promotes equitable access to learning by encouraging early childhood programs to offer multiple ways for children and family members to engage with materials, understand concepts, and demonstrate their learning. Access also refers to the social environment (attitudes, beliefs, and relationships) of a space. High-quality early childhood spaces promote inclusion by acknowledging, valuing, and welcoming the autonomy and contributions of young children and their families.

Participation

Access alone does not ensure high-quality inclusion. Inclusion is also promoted through the participation of young children and their families in early learning settings and natural environments. Participation is understood as each child and family's meaningful engagement as members in a given space, according to their identified preferences and capacity.

To support meaningful participation for all disabled children and their families, adults in early learning spaces must intentionally hold specialized competencies, such as those articulated in the DEC "Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education Standards" and NAEYC's "Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators" position statement. They also must apply high-quality practices, such as those described in the "DEC Recommended Practices," NAEYC's "Developmentally Appropriate Practice" position statement, social-and-emotional learning frameworks, UDL, and tiered instructional models.

Young children and families benefit from a wide range of individualized and differentiated supports that provide them with the knowledge, skills, and services essential for promoting their desired outcomes. In addition to universal practices, individualizing instruction and caregiver coaching are often needed to meet the unique needs of children and families. This includes embedding specially designed instruction within everyday routines and activities and making adaptations and modifications to ensure that each and every child can fully access and participate alongside their peers.

The ways in which young children and families choose to participate will vary, shaped by their individual agency, strengths, preferences, needs, and resources as well as the early learning spaces in which they are members. Similarly, the ways in which early childhood professionals respond and provide individualized support will also shape participation.

Belonging

Access and participation are not enough to ensure high-quality inclusion. Young children with disabilities and their families must feel a sense of belonging within early learning spaces. Belonging results from the membership experienced by children through everyday relationships and interactions. It is shaped by the practices, services, and policies implemented across the systems in which children and their families participate. To support belonging, adults teach about identity, co-create environments with children and families, facilitate authentic friendships, and promote disability-led values.

The extent to which and ways that young children and their families experience belonging are shaped by the inclusionary or exclusionary values and attitudes of the communities with which they interact. To promote belonging, everyone must honor children with disabilities' individual agency; ensure the identities of young learners and their families are honored, affirmed, and valued within all spaces; and promote connection. Additionally, belonging is promoted by affirming the genuine membership of young children and families, actively challenging ableism and other forms of marginalization, and rejecting practices that position disabled children and their families as guests. These approaches allow individuals' unique characteristics and contributions to be valued and celebrated.

System-level Supports

A comprehensive system of supports is necessary to ensure that young children, their families, and early childhood professionals have access to high-quality early learning spaces in which they experience a sense of belonging. System-level supports are the vital infrastructure that ensures professionals, programs, and organizations are prepared with the policies, funding, staffing, professional competencies, resources, and dispositions needed to implement effective inclusive practices. These components include

- Blending and braiding funding
- Creating policies and accountability systems where inclusion is essential and not an add-on
- Ensuring that in-service and preservice professional development for all adults (e.g., practitioners, administrators, specialists) centers inclusive practice
- Creating structures that promote professional collaboration
- Promoting the use of data-informed decision making
- Creating systems that value the physical and mental health and well-being of the workforce
- Meaningfully partnering with families and individuals with disabilities in systems-level decision making
- Coordinating communication across and between organizations, agencies, programs, and families
- Coordinating professional development resources across programs

These system supports are essential so that adults supporting young children with disabilities have what they need to implement effective practices that promote access, participation, and belonging.

Call to Action

Inclusion for young children with disabilities and their families is not simply a vision for the future. It is the work of today. We know there are significant barriers to inclusion that exist within a system designed to exclude. Yet each moment in an early learning setting is an opportunity to affirm children's dignity, challenge ableism, and strengthen partnerships with families. By grounding our practice in the characteristics of inclusion, we create spaces where children with disabilities are not only invited and included, but truly belong.

We call on each and every one of us to carry this commitment forward by

- Partnering and sharing power with families and individuals with disabilities to make impactful decisions
- Reflecting on and disrupting ableism, racism, and other biases in our own practice
- Shaping environments and interactions that honor every child's identities, agency, joy, and potential
- Advocating for systems, policies, and funding that uphold justice

We are each responsible for putting this statement into practice. When we act together with courage and care, we ensure that every child's rightful presence and active and meaningful participation are recognized, supported, valued, and celebrated—today and always.

Appendix A: Position Statement Workgroup Members

Name	Affiliation
Megan Vinh	Position Statement Chair; Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute
Ruby Batz	University of Nevada, Reno
Kris Bowman	REDI, The Amoore Group
Shawna Harbin	Purdue University, West Lafayette
Mary Harrill	National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
Peggy Kemp	Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC)
Chih-Ing Lim	Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute
Hailey Love	University of Wisconsin, Madison
Melody Mann	DEC Intern
Michelle Ogorek	Wisconsin Early Learning Technical Assistance & Implementation
Elena Soukakou	University of Roehampton, London
Jenna Weglarz-Ward	University of Nevada, Las Vegas

The Early Childhood Inclusion Position Statement workgroup members had varied positionalities, including diversity of race, disability, languages, location (e.g., international), roles, and family identity.

The workgroup also thanks Catasha Williams (Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute) for her contributions to its early work.

Appendix B: Timeline and Process Leading to the Revisions

Fall 2024: To inform the initial revisions process, the workgroup developed a survey to gather early childhood educators' perspectives on

- The position statement's current definition of inclusion and components of inclusion (e.g., what needs to remain, what needs to be updated)
- The level of agreement with the current position statement
- What quality inclusion looks like to them
- Current research that should inform revisions to the position statement
- Whether/how ECE professionals are using the position statement in their everyday practice

Winter/Spring 2025: The workgroup issued the survey and analyzed the results (almost 200 educators from within DEC's and NAEYC's membership submitted responses).

Summer 2025: The workgroup held a series of listening sessions with early childhood educators to explore themes that emerged from the survey responses.

Fall 2025: The workgroup began drafting a revised position statement with a focus on an updated definition of inclusion and its components. It held well-attended sessions at DEC's and NAEYC's annual conferences to gather feedback on the draft revisions.

Winter 2026: The workgroup continued to revise the position statement based on feedback gathered at the fall conferences.

Spring 2026: The revised statement was issued for public comment.

Summer 2026: DEC and NAEYC Governing Boards approve a final, updated position statement.

Fall 2026: The position statement is published and disseminated.

Appendix C: Glossary

ability*—The means or skills to do something. In this position statement, we use the term "ability" more broadly than the traditional focus on cognition or psychometric properties to apply across all domains of development. We focus and build on each child's abilities, strengths, and interests, acknowledging disabilities and developmental delays while avoiding ableism (see also disability below).

ableism+—A systemic form of oppression deeply embedded in society that devalues disabilities through structures based on implicit assumptions about standards of physical, intellectual, and emotional normalcy.

ableist systems[1] —Network of policies, laws, regulations, practices, and societal/cultural norms that prioritize non-disabled experiences and exclude disabled people from full participation and equal opportunity. This includes barriers in societal infrastructures such as education and health care.

developmentally appropriate practice (DAP)*—Refers to a framework of principles and guidelines for practice that promotes young children's optimal learning and development. DAP is a way of framing a teacher's intentional decision making. It begins with three Core Considerations: (1) what is known about general processes of child development and learning; (2) what is known about the child as an individual who is a member of a particular family and community; and (3) what is known about the social and cultural contexts in which the learning occurs.

disability or developmental delay*—Children may have a disability or developmental delay (including being in the process of early identification and diagnosis) regardless of enrollment in IDEA or private services. Legally defined for young children under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), disabilities include intellectual disability; hearing, speech, or language, visual, and/or orthopedic impairment; autism; and traumatic brain injury. Under IDEA, states define developmental delays to include delays in physical, cognitive, communication, social or emotional (including mental health), or adaptive development. These legal definitions are important for determining access to early intervention and early childhood special education services. The consequences of the definition can vary based on the degree to which they are seen as variations in children's assets or the degree to which they are seen as deficits. (See also ability.)

early childhood*—The first period in child development, beginning at birth. Although developmental periods do not rigidly correspond to chronological age, early childhood is generally defined as including all children from birth through age 8.

early childhood education (ECE)*—A term defined using the developmental definition of birth through approximately age 8, regardless of programmatic, regulatory, funding, or delivery sectors or mechanisms.

early childhood special education (ECSE) – A term defined as services and professional practices tailored for young children aged birth through age eight who have or are at risk for developmental delays and disabilities, alongside support for their families.

early intervention (EI) – A term defined as a system of coordinated services and evidence-based practices designed to support families and enhance the optimal development of young children (from birth to age eight) who have or are at risk for developmental delays and disabilities.

early learning settings*—These include programs serving children from birth through age 8. Setting refers to the locations in which early childhood education takes place—childcare centers, childcare homes, elementary schools, religious-based centers and many others.

inclusion*— Intentionally providing equitable access to learning opportunities, implementing individualized supports that promote participation and engagement, fostering belonging for each and every child with a disability, and ensuring systems are designed with and for individuals with disabilities.

individualized instruction—A strategy to tailor learning experiences to a specific child, including the content, pacing, and strategies. Examples may include using child's interests, development of visual supports and scripted stories, environment changes or specialized materials, using of communication devices, individualized routines, or providing choices and prompts.

natural environments[2] —Natural environments are defined as "settings that are natural or typical for a same-aged infant or toddler without a disability, may include the home or community settings

[1] Lundberg & Chen (2024) and Yu (2024) and Lundenberg, D. J., & Chen, J. A. (2024). Structural ableism in public health and healthcare: A definition and conceptual framework. Lancet Regional Health-Americas, 30, 1-8. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lana.2023.100650 and Yu, T. (2024). The anti-ableist manifesto. Souvenir Press.

position statement*—Position statements express the official views of DEC and NAEYC and are informed by research, professional expertise, and extensive feedback from their members. You can find DEC's definition of a position statement here and NAEYC's here.

rightful presence[3]—A concept that recognizes the inherent value of those traditionally marginalized and normalizes a culture of belonging and shared burden, cost, and power.

tiered intervention approaches*—Also referred to as multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). "In early care and education, an MTSS framework is a way to provide high-quality teaching and responsive caregiving through the delivery of differentiated support for all young children…Given these core principles and focus, ultimately an MTSS framework offers a process for revising instructional and care variables such as (a) what child outcomes are taught or addressed; (b) where care, instruction, and interventions are delivered; (c) when instruction and interventions are delivered; and (d) how instruction and interventions are delivered. The goal of implementing an MTSS framework with young children is to be aware of areas (e.g., developmental, early academics) in which each child has differing needs and to match systems of support to those individual needs. Creating a match between teaching and caregiving and children's needs requires a hierarchy of support that is differentiated through a data-based decision-making process (Abbott et al., 2017; Pretti-Frontczak et al., 2011)." (p. 2-3)

Universal Design*—A concept that can be used to support access to environments, curriculum, materials, and activities in many different types of settings through the removal of physical and structural barriers. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) reflects practices that provide multiple and varied formats for instruction, learning, and mastery of skills. UDL principles include consideration of multiple means of representation (what), engagement (why), and expression (how) of teaching and learning[4]

young children*—Refers to children in the period of early childhood development, from birth through approximately age 8. Although developmental periods do not rigidly correspond to chronological age, early childhood is generally defined as including all children from birth through age 8.

*Glossary definitions with the * symbol indicate that these are drawn from the glossary in NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practice Position Statement (2020). Note that the definition for "disability or development delay" and "universal design" have been adapted.*

Glossary definitions with the + symbol indicate that these are drawn from the glossary in NAEYC's Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Position Statement (2019)

[2] Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. §§ 1400 et seq. (2004).

[3] National Center on Inclusion Toward Rightful Presence. (2025). Rightful presence in education systems. https://swiftschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Rightful-Presence-in-Education-Systems-Brief.pdf and McCart, A., Kelly, W. & Sailor, W. (2023). Build equity, join justice.: A paradigm for school belonging. Norton.

[4] CAST https://udlguidelines.cast.org and Gargiulo, R. M., & Kilgo, J. L. (2025). An introduction to young children with delays and disabilities: Birth through eight (6th ed.). Sage

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