

RESEARCH NOTES:

SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES OR SUSPECTED DELAYS

One in six children in the U.S. has one or more developmental disabilities or other developmental delays. Children with disabilities are children first. ALL children need individualized instruction and interactions and opportunities to thrive in early learning settings. To support this, build a program culture that celebrates differences.

THE TAKE HOME:

1. Individualize learning environments so that all children can engage with them.
2. Build relationships through individualized interactions and communication strategies.
3. Create a program culture that honors and affirms children's identities.



WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

- Inclusion helps all children. This is true even if they have a disability or suspected delay.
- Children with disabilities or suspected delays should learn and receive services in natural environments, alongside their peers or siblings without disabilities. Use individualized supports and modifications to meet this goal in all learning environments. This includes home and community settings.
- Broaden your communication strategies! This might include social cues, assistive technology, and anything else a child might prefer. There is no one “right” way for a child to communicate. Eye gaze-following and imitation can be particularly helpful communication tools. Assistive technology devices like picture boards may encourage a child to communicate more.
- Provide home language supports for all young children, including children with disabilities or suspected delays. All children benefit from learning more than one language.
- For some children, developmental delays can result from the way chronic stress impacts the body. Responsive caregiving can have a protective effect. Access to even one responsive, nurturing caregiver can reduce the negative impacts of toxic stress and trauma.
- Some children are misdiagnosed with disabilities or delays when they exhibit behaviors that challenge adults. These behaviors often have roots in trauma, not disabilities or delays. This disproportionately impacts young boys of color.
- Talk to children about what they notice and discuss stereotypes directly. Young children have a natural curiosity about things they notice, like race or a physical disability. Taking a “colorblind” or “disability-blind” approach increases biased thinking.
- Children's identities include culture, language, race, ability, and more. This can be a powerful source of connection and resilience. Build a program culture that celebrates and affirms children's identities rather than focusing on just acceptance or tolerance. This is a key part of responsive caregiving.



WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

- Children with disabilities or suspected delays should learn alongside their peers. For example, a therapist might involve other siblings in exercises during a home visit rather than working in a separate room. This provides learning opportunities for everyone!
- Ensure that all children can engage with toys and materials. During a visual scan of program or home spaces, what do you notice? Are all children engaging with toys and materials? Can all children access different spaces in the learning environment? Look for cues that you need to make modifications. For example, railings on a step stool can help a child access the sink and wash their hands independently.

- Your interactions with children with disabilities or suspected delays may look a little different. It is important to give children plenty of time to respond. Their response may be as subtle as a change in facial expression or body language or posture. It is helpful to get to know a child’s typical communication behaviors. Any changes can be a clue that extra supports, or adaptations are needed.

TRY THIS!



- Adapt materials to increase access to and engagement with materials. For example, add foam handles or large rings to toys to make them easier to grasp. Make materials larger or brighter. For tactile experiences, add fabric or other fun textures to books.
- Use assistive technology such as switches on toys or communication aids. Communication aids can be simple, like pointing to a photo on a picture board. They can also include pressing message buttons that activate prerecorded messages. Anything that helps young children communicate is great!
- If a child makes a movement or is vocal, playfully imitate them back. They might be asking for something or just trying to connect. Pay attention to their cues to see what they might be communicating and respond appropriately.
- Imitation can be a powerful tool for connecting with children with disabilities. Home-based programs can explore fun imitation games with parents and other caregivers.
- Reduce the noise level in a learning environment. This provides all children access to communication cues. It can be particularly useful for children with visual or hearing impairments and can also help children who struggle with paying attention.
- Many adults struggle with how to respond when a child asks about someone’s visible disability, race, or other difference. Try not to respond with embarrassment or by dismissing the child. Instead, calmly help children understand what they see and hear. Discuss stereotypes directly.
- Pay attention to use of ableist language and the impacts it can have on other people. Ableist language includes language that is offensive to people with disabilities. It also includes language that is derogatory or negative about a disability or delay, like, “that’s crazy!” or “that’s lame!” These statements can negatively impact people with cognitive or physical disabilities and perpetuate negative stereotypes about disabilities or suspected delays.
- Access to at least one nurturing adult can reduce or eliminate the effects of toxic stress. Help teachers and home visitors manage their own stress. Reassure them that their relationship is the best thing they can give a child. Consider ways they can help parents do the same.

LEARN MORE:

EARLY LEARNING OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK (ELOF) EFFECTIVE PRACTICE GUIDES:

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/effective-practice-guides/effective-practice-guides>

ECLKC HOME PAGE FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES:

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/children-disabilities>

RESEARCH NOTES: TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES:

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/talking-children-about-differences-similarities>

ZERO TO THREE ARTICLE ON DISCRIT (DISABILITIES STUDIES + CRITICAL RACE THEORY):

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/3094-dis-ability-critical-race-studies-discrim-for-inclusion-in-early-childhood-education-ethical-considerations-of-implicit-and-explicit-bias#chapter-1994>

CONNECTING AT HOME

SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES OR SUSPECTED DELAYS

One in six children in the U.S. has one or more developmental disabilities or delays. Children with disabilities are children first. ALL children need individualized support. Here are some strategies for supporting young children with disabilities or suspected delays.

CELEBRATE DIFFERENCES

Children naturally notice differences between people and might comment on what they see. This includes things like race and ability. That is normal! Respond calmly, and help children make sense of the differences they notice. For example, you might say, “Yes, that child uses a wheelchair to get around. And, just like you, they can go wherever they want to!” Differing abilities are a normal part of life. Answering children’s questions openly and honestly helps them understand that.

EMBEDDED LEARNING

Young children with disabilities or suspected delays should have opportunities to learn with their siblings and peers. For example, have a therapist work with your child alongside their siblings so that all children participate in the exercises. Peer support goes both ways!

PROVIDE MODIFICATIONS

Adapt materials to be accessible to all children. Allow each child to participate in daily routines independently as much as possible. If a child is not able to access a space or a toy, that is your cue to change it! For example, add sponge squares or tabs to book pages to make them easier to turn.

BUILD COMMUNICATION

Broaden the communication strategies you use with your child. Is there a way of communicating with you that they like best? Try picture boards, gestures, and social cues like smiling. There is no one “right” way to communicate. If a child makes a movement or vocalization, try imitating them back! This can be a great way to connect with children with disabilities.

