

5

Working with Children with Diverse Characteristics, Abilities, and Needs



You're likely to have children with a range of abilities and needs in your group, including infants and toddlers with a delay or disability. Wherever children are in their development, you can adapt the space, curriculum, and your own interactions to meet them.

It may seem intimidating to design a classroom that is inclusive of all children, but you can create comfortable places for infants and toddlers from all backgrounds and with all levels of ability to learn and grow. While factors like having well-qualified staff and small group sizes and ratios are important, you may face less than ideal conditions in your program. You can still focus on providing a positive and healthy learning environment, designing curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for all the children, and treating families as partners. Throughout this book, you've seen a number of ways to offer different levels of complexity in the experiences you present. Additional suggestions are presented in this chapter.

Keep in mind that play is the work of all children, so wherever a child is developmentally, the space must be accessible for play, tailored to the child's interests and abilities, and safe for exploring in open-ended ways. This may mean that you change your room design so items can be reached from a lower space (on the floor) or higher (from a wheelchair). You may need to adapt materials to help children be successful, like using self-adhesive medical wrap to make the handles of a rolling pin easier to grasp. Be sure children can reach and use the materials and make choices—this is key for supporting children as they explore cause and effect, problem solve, and engage in creative play.

You may also need to consider other elements to set children up for successful play. It's challenging for a child who is hard of hearing to pick up on play cues and hear your sportscasting when there is a lot of background noise. Consider limiting music in the background when not offering a dance activity or doing music activities outside. If a child is easily overwhelmed by sensory experiences, be sure to offer tools to facilitate exploration—he may feel comfortable using a stick to poke the foam paint if he does not want to touch it directly.

Partner with Families Using a Strengths-Based Model

Many families compare their children to the other children they observe in the community. Outside the classroom, it's common to hear about how high each child can count, how toilet trained each child is, how beautifully they sleep through the night, and how clever they are at solving puzzles.

For family members of children with delays, these conversations may be painful. It's important to help these family members find support, not just through their child's therapists and doctors but also from other families who have experienced similar situations. Knowing that their child will continue to grow and develop skills, though at his own pace and in a unique way, is important to hear.

To get a better picture of a child's play capabilities in a range of situations, invite families to be observational partners with you. Since families are experts on their own child and have often done their own research or sought out specialists for guidance, their viewpoint is

valuable to the ongoing process of including their child in the classroom. This said, families look to you as the expert in your classroom's culture, expectations, and routines, and they need you to identify ways their child can grow in your space.

As you include children with disabilities, you must consider how to best support the child's play and interactions with the other children in your classroom. You may find that some families of children with disabilities are not ready for their child to take on classroom challenges that you think are appropriate. Consider that families may have a strong inclination to protect their children from taking physical risks or moving out of their comfort zones. By documenting what a child is doing in your setting, through photography and video, you can share the child's strengths with her family in ongoing conferences, then talk about building on those strengths to encourage development by inviting the child to take small risks or move a bit out of her comfort zone.

Starting with capabilities before talking about things to work on sets the stage for families to see children as capable learners, individuals who are always growing and moving forward, at their own pace. As they see their child's successes at school, parents are often eager to join you in creating similar experiences at home, as Layla's parents are:

Teacher: Look, see how Layla can sit up in her chair? She's much stronger than just a month or so ago. We'll try offering art at a little table rather than in her high chair.

Parent: I didn't know she could do that! We can try that too.



Strategies for Supporting Children in Play

Many children with delays or disabilities may need simple modifications to activities or materials, and others will need more support. As you consider how to help all the children be successful in play, look at your environment, routines, and the ways you interact with children and how they relate to each other. It starts with seeing children as children first and remembering that best practices are best practices for *all* children.