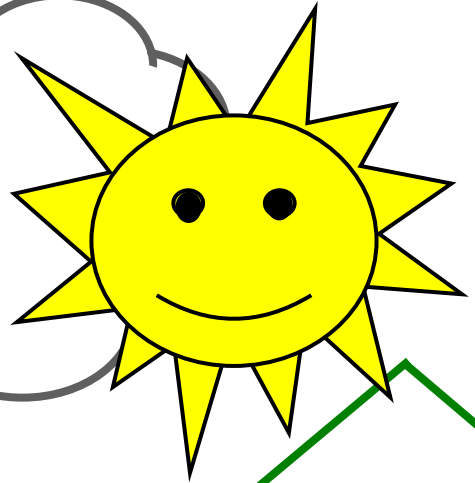


Supporting Positive Attitudes



I do not judge children based on appearance or behavior, & I do not let children judge each other in these ways.

I consider my own attitudes because adults' attitudes are communicated to children.

I foster friendships, not feelings of pity, for children with disabilities.

I guide children to see similarities between themselves and their peers with disabilities.

I allow children to ask questions about peers with disabilities, & I provide facts, at an appropriate developmental level, to answer questions.

I educate parents as well as children, & I help parents who may be uncomfortable with disabilities to address concerns & fears.

Adapted from Han, Ostrosky and Diamond. 2006. Children's Attitudes Toward Peers with Disabilities: Supporting Positive Attitude Development. Young Exceptional Children 10(1):2-11.

Helping Young Children Learn About Differences



One of the most wonderful things about young children is their abundant curiosity; it only makes sense that children would be curious about each other as well. In most early childhood settings, children have many opportunities to explore both similarities and differences with other children of varied abilities. Let's look at a few ideas that you can use to help children learn to understand and celebrate differences as well as similarities in the people around them.

It is important to realize that children look to you as a model for how to act in unfamiliar situations. They will mirror your attitudes toward other children whether you reflect acceptance or discomfort. It is vital, then, that you assess

your own feelings about a child's inclusion, learn to overcome any fears or concerns, and get any training you may need. If you are apprehensive or resistant about including a child in a wheelchair, it is likely that the children will also be uncomfortable and possibly even resent or dislike the child. On the other hand, if you are comfortable and matter-of-fact about including a child who uses a wheelchair, the children learn that a wheelchair is not a barrier to participation, and the child in the wheelchair can relax, be himself, and participate.

You may hope that labeling children to explain a disability will help them understand why a particular child looks or acts differently. In reality, labels explain very little to young children (or anyone else, for that matter). Being told that a child has Down syndrome, for example, does not provide any information about why the child moves or talks the way she does. Children are more interested in what the child can do and in how the child can interact with them.

Some providers try to anticipate children's need to know by preparing them ahead of time. In fact, it is much better to give children the information they need *when they need it*, and children's comments or questions clearly tell you what information they need. When a topic comes up, it is best to respond briefly, with an answer that matches the simplicity of the question. If a child asks, "Why doesn't Jamie walk?", you might say, *His muscles are not as strong as yours or His body works differently so he gets around in his wheelchair*. It is unnecessary to give more information than children ask for; instead, wait for more questions. Sometimes, you might even be able to encourage children to ask the child with the disability their question. You could say, *Maybe Jamie would like to tell you himself why he doesn't walk*.

It may be difficult for children to verbalize the complexity of their feelings about people with disabilities. Very young children often do not appear to notice differences, while older children tend to freely express their curiosity or discomfort with another child's appearance or behavior. Depending on the situation and the child, preschool children may verbalize what they are thinking or feeling; other times, their actions show they are curious or anxious.

Young children may express their thoughts in cautious reactions (avoiding a child who drools), by imitating another child's behavior (pretending to have seizure), or by incorporating their concerns into play (having a doll who cannot talk). Although it can be unnerving to see a child's curiosity or discomfort played out so vividly, it provides a wonderful opportunity for you to talk about children's feelings and offer simple explanations. By listening and watching closely, you can observe what information children may need in order to understand and be comfortable with any child.

One of your roles in supporting inclusion is to create an environment that is safe for questions and comments from the children while at the same time looking for ways to directly teach sensitivity and respect for individual differences. As young children learn about differences and similarities, they build friendships with each other which, in turn, help to create a larger community of respect.