Early Childhood Inclusion: What it Looks Like and Doesn't Look Like

All children have the right to experience settings, relationships, and interactions that will support and further their development and learning. Young children with disabilities have both the need and the right to participate in and benefit from the same experiences as their peers without disabilities in all settings and activities within their communities. The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include: a sense of belonging and membership in the community; positive social relationships and friendships; and, opportunities for development and learning to reach their full potential as contributing members of their communities.

The Virginia Cross-Sector Professional Development (VCPD) Inclusive Practices Task Force created this document to describe high-quality inclusive practices for all children in birth-to- five programs so that all early childhood education and care providers, administrators, and policymakers can continuously improve their practices. This document is organized according to the three defining features of inclusion--access, participation, and supports. These have been identified in the joint position statement of the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The descriptions provided in this document can act as a blueprint for identifying the key components of high-quality inclusive programs. It does not include every detail possible but serves as a tool for reflection and planning for change.

The VCPD Inclusive Practices Task Force encourages all to use this document as well as other tools and resources to improve inclusive practices to benefit all children ages birth to five.

Early Childhood Inclusion: What it Looks Like and Doesn't Look Like

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ACCESS
Environment and materials are planned and implemented to allow all children to engage in play and learning activities with peers and adults.

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Key Concepts:
1. All children are invited and welcomed.
2. All children can move around and interact within the environment.
3. All children can use materials, tools, toys, etc.

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Access DOES looks like this:	Access DOES NOT look like this:
Interaction styles are welcoming, responsive, warm, enthusiastic, and non-judgmental.	Interaction styles are rigid, insensitive, or disengaged.
Environmental modifications in the classroom and playground areas are strategically planned, designed and carried out.	Environment is disorganized, cluttered, or overwhelming. Environment presents barriers to engage with materials and move freely around the environment. Playground design limits play and interactions.
Materials are available, reachable and can be independently obtained.	Materials are hidden or stored out of reach.
Materials represent a variety of cultures, identities, languages and abilities and are relatable.	Materials reflect a predominant culture and lack diversity.

PARTICIPATION
Instruction, accommodations, supports and services intentionally promote belonging, and engagement in play and learning activities with peers and adults.

Key Concepts:
1. All children take part and fully contribute to all aspects of the community.
2. All children actively engage in the community with accommodations and support.
3. All children belong as community members.
4. All children share and contribute to meaningful relationships and positive interactions with peers and adults.

Participation DOES look like this:	Participation DOES NOT look like this:
Environmental settings are designed to increase opportunities for effective engagement with instruction, activities, and peers/adults.	Individualized learning and response styles are not considered. Accommodations are limited or non-existent.
Environmental rules/expectations are clear, consistent, easily understood, and created by the community.	Rules are established by adults without child input. Rules are not clear or defined in an age-appropriate way. Rules are inconsistently applied.
Learning opportunities are embedded within the typical daily routine.	Specific skills training and related services are isolated or provided in separate rooms.
Materials, information, and directions are presented in multiple ways.	Materials, information, directions are generally provided in one method and one language.
Multiple methods are provided for children to respond and demonstrate knowledge and/or mastery.	Demonstration of knowledge and/or mastery is expected in one way.
Learning/Instructional content is connected to children's interests.	Content is selected by adults only.

Individual uniqueness, needs, and supports are recognized, encouraged and taught.	Supports, services and instructional practices are general rather than individualized.
Equal opportunity exists for children to interact with and support each other.	Responsibility for helping children with special needs lies with adults only. Supportive roles are not offered to all. The same peer buddy is always assigned to the same child.
Assistive technologies are used to meaningfully engage in activities and interactions with others.	Assistive technology is not provided. Verbal responses and interactions are the standard expectation.
A variety of communication methods, nonverbal body language and emotional cues are recognized and practiced.	Communicative intents, communication methods and alternative responses are not considered or ignored.
Strengths are recognized, celebrated, and promoted.	Focus is on what children cannot do.
Activity and playmate choices are offered and encouraged.	Activity choices are limited or restricted. Playmates are assigned.
Positive relationships and friendships are encouraged, facilitated, and supported.	Strategies to initiate and maintain interactions and friendships are not modeled by adults or explicitly taught.
Families are provided with a variety of resources and opportunities to support decision-making.	Families are not informed or are provided with restrictive or selective options.

SUPPORTS
Systemic structures exist that support incentives, collaboration, professional development, teaming, mentoring and coaching to maximize opportunities for all children to engage in play and learning activities with peers and adults.

Key Concepts: All practitioners benefit from an established systemic infrastructure for which the funding is stable.
1.   All practitioners benefit from opportunities and time to collaborate.
2.   All practitioners benefit from continuous professional development.
3.   All practitioners benefit from ongoing coaching.

Support DOES look like this:	Support DOES NOT look like this:
Administration is knowledgeable and responsive to program needs and requirements.	Child-to-staff ratios and caseload sizes do not meet requirements or follow recommended guidelines. Classroom staffing, size and placement is determined prior to knowing the needs of the children. Related services or supports are delivered in publicly-funded programs only. Support and reciprocal communication between administration and staff is limited or nonexistent. Program policies and procedures are not written, updated as needed, and shared.
Administration identifies a variety of funding strategies and allows for flexible funding.	Funding streams are segregated and cannot be blended.
All workforce members are well-prepared, with supported opportunities for ongoing training, technical assistance, coaching, and professional development.	Professional development is irrelevant and/or delivered as a one-time training with no follow up.

	In-classroom ongoing mentoring and coaching does not exist.
Teams, including a range of stakeholders, have the opportunity to meet regularly to communicate, collaborate, and plan.	Collaboration and communication between professionals is limited or sporadic. Work hours do not allow time for intentional and dedicated collaborative planning and communication.
Data-informed decision making is used to implement short and long-term program planning.	Data is not collected, examined or utilized. Decisions are made by administrators without the input of service providers, families, and other stakeholders.
Ongoing evaluation is conducted and results are used for program improvement.	Formative or summative program evaluation is intermittently or rarely used for program improvement.

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Inclusive Practices State and National Resources

The Virginia Cross Sector Professional Development (VCPD) Inclusive Practices Task Force compiled a list of state and national resources in support of inclusive practices for young children birth-to-age five. The VCPD **Inclusive Practices State and National Resources** (May 2020), available on the VCPD website (http://vcpd.net/), focus on awareness and rationale, evaluation of inclusive programs, high-quality inclusive practices, and systems level supports.