



## What is Early Childhood Inclusion?

**F**or some of us who work with young children and their families inclusion is quite new. Inclusion means serving children with disabilities together with other children who are developing in a typical way. Although most of us would agree that it is not a good idea to keep any group of children segregated from their peers, that is exactly what has happened to children with special needs. For many years they have gone to special schools, sometimes far away from their homes. But now, thanks to legislation (see the handout entitled *Laws Supporting Early Childhood Inclusion* on p. 3 in this module) and the growing commitment of families and communities, children with disabilities can go to child care and preschool programs where other children their age go. They have the same teachers, the same classrooms, and the same

chances as other children to grow up as part of their communities. That's inclusion!

But what do we know about the effects of inclusion? Can young children who have special needs learn and develop in regular classrooms? What about the children who do not have disabilities? Will they start falling behind? These are some of the questions families and teachers asked when inclusion was first tried in preschools across the country 20 years ago.

Here is what we now know about the benefits of inclusion.

- With support, young children with special needs in inclusive classrooms maintain their rate of developmental growth. They do not lose ground or stop learning. In fact, they show some gains in their social skills. They interact more with others and they play with toys in different, more complex ways.
- Children who do not have special needs also continue to learn and grow the same ways they did before they had classmates with special needs. In addition, they have opportunities to learn about differences in human growth and development. They may become more accepting of children who are different as they learn to work and play with children who have a wide range of abilities.
- For families of children with special needs the inclusive environment provides a real world perspective for interpreting their children's accomplishments and needs. It also provides them an opportunity to see chronologically age-appropriate activities and to meet other parents.
- For families of typically developing children the inclusive setting provides a concrete opportunity for teaching their children about differences in growth and development. Families may develop a greater understanding of persons with special needs, become more sensitive to the needs of families with children who have disabilities, and become future advocates for community integration. ■

### References

- Wesley, P.W. (1992). *Mainstreaming young children: A training series for child care providers*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center.
- Wesley, P. W. (1995, Winter). What's New? *All Together Now!*, 1(1), 9. [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center.]