

Belonging by Design:

Why Inclusive Classrooms Matter in Early Childhood

In early childhood education, *inclusion* is often described as “integrating” children with disabilities (or developmental delays) into learning environments alongside peers without disabilities. But true inclusion is more than sharing a room—it is a values-driven, evidence-informed commitment to **belonging, participation, and growth** for *every* child.

At All Superstars Preschool, we approach this topic from a place of love and respect for children and families—while also taking seriously what research shows about what works, what to plan for, and what to do when things get hard.

What “inclusion” actually means (and why definitions matter)

[A widely cited joint position statement from the Division for Early Childhood \(DEC\) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\)](#) defines early childhood inclusion as a set of values, policies, and practices that support the right of every young child—regardless of ability—to participate as a full member of their community. Crucially, it emphasizes three non-negotiables: **access, participation, and supports**.

That definition aligns with major policy guidance from the [U.S. Departments of Education and Health & Human Services](#), which argues that young children with disabilities should have access to **high-quality** early childhood programs alongside peers without disabilities—with **individualized and appropriate supports** so they can fully participate.

Internationally, the direction is similar: the [Salamanca Statement \(UNESCO\)](#) calls on education systems to enroll children in regular schools “unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise,” pushing systems to adapt to learners rather than excluding learners who need adaptation. And the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(CRPD\)](#) recognizes an inclusive education system as part of the right to education.

Why this matters: If inclusion is treated as a “placement choice,” programs may overlook the supports that make inclusion successful. The evidence strongly suggests that *quality and intentional supports* determine outcomes—not the label “inclusive” on a brochure.

What the research says: benefits for children with disabilities

1) Social learning, communication, and relationships

In preschool, peers are a powerful curriculum. Inclusive settings create frequent opportunities for shared play, conversation, imitation, and social problem-solving—skills that are especially important for children working on communication, social interaction, or adaptive functioning.

[A well-cited study in *Exceptional Children*](#) found that **preschoolers with disabilities in inclusive classrooms demonstrated stronger outcomes in language/social domains than peers in more segregated settings (with the important nuance that individual needs and supports matter).**

A broader review of early childhood inclusion research notes decades of work showing that inclusion can support developmental gains—particularly when programs use evidence-based instructional and interaction strategies.

2) Higher expectations and access to rich learning opportunities

One major advantage of inclusive early childhood programs is access: more diverse materials, more peer modeling, more natural routines, and a fuller range of early learning experiences. However, a key takeaway from the research is that *access alone isn't enough*. **Children's progress depends heavily on the *features* of the setting—teacher practice, ratios, classroom composition, individualized instruction, and the availability of supports.**

3) Program quality can be strong—or even stronger—in inclusive settings

[A research summary from the Early Childhood Technical Assistance \(ECTA\)](#) ecosystem highlights findings that inclusive programs can be as good as or better than noninclusive programs on global quality measures, though disability-specific quality indicators also matter.

Benefits for peers without disabilities: empathy, leadership, and belonging

Inclusion is not charity; it is community-building—and research suggests peers without disabilities can benefit too.

[A policy/research brief](#) summarizing preschool inclusion findings reports that typically developing children in inclusive classrooms may show **greater understanding of others' emotions and more positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities.**

Research syntheses also emphasize that, when inclusion is well supported, peers without disabilities generally do **not** experience harm to their learning—and inclusive classrooms can

cultivate prosocial skills (helping, cooperating, perspective-taking) that matter long after preschool. We all learn and grow together at All Superstars Preschool.

The ingredients of successful inclusion: supports that change the day-to-day

The most consistent conclusion across guidance documents is that inclusion works best when adults plan intentionally for **participation** (not just presence).

Below are points strongly represented in research and professional guidance:

1) Evidence-based instruction embedded in real routines

Embedded instruction (teaching IEP-related goals *within* normal classroom activities, routines, and play) is identified as an evidence-based practice for young children with disabilities in inclusive settings.

2) Peer-mediated strategies

Peer-mediated interventions intentionally teach peers how to engage, invite, respond, and sustain interaction—especially helpful when a child is socially isolated or learning social-communication skills. Systematic reviews support peer-mediated approaches as promising/effective for improving social outcomes, particularly for children with autism in natural contexts like schools.

3) Professional practice frameworks (DEC Recommended Practices)

DEC’s Recommended Practices organize what high-quality support looks like across domains like environment, instruction, interaction, family partnership, teaming, and transitions—explicitly intended for inclusive/natural environments.

What to consider (so inclusion stays loving, safe, and effective)

A love-centered approach doesn’t ignore challenges—it plans for them.

Staffing, ratios, and training

Inclusion can stretch a classroom if staffing and training don’t match children’s needs. Research summaries emphasize that outcomes depend on factors such as teacher-child ratios and teachers’ ability to tailor instruction. This is why we at All Superstars Preschool ensure classrooms with disabilities are adequately staffed to ensure the needs of **ALL** children are being met.

Sensory needs, communication, and behavior as “messages”

When a child struggles—meltdowns, aggression, withdrawal, refusal—it’s often communication: “This is too loud,” “I don’t understand,” “I don’t feel safe,” or “I don’t have the skills yet.” Inclusion succeeds when teams respond with proactive supports (visual schedules, predictable routines, sensory tools, communication supports), not punishment. We take the time to understand the internal and external stressors a child may be experiencing and act appropriately.

Family partnership and shared expectations

Families hold essential expertise: what regulation looks like at home, what triggers exist, what motivates their child, what language is respectful. Inclusion is strongest when families and educators share a plan and communicate frequently. When a child with disabilities enrolls out our preschool, take the time to fully understand that child's individual needs, behavioral patterns and home routine. This is done with one-on-one meetings with the Director, Wendy and the child's classroom's lead teacher. We know it's a team effort and the family plays a massive roll in this.

When things get difficult: “fallback” options that aren’t failures

Inclusion is not “all or nothing.” [Under U.S. special education law](#), the guiding idea is **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)**—children should learn with peers without disabilities *to the maximum extent appropriate*, with supplementary aids and services. At the same time, the law recognizes that placement must be individualized and includes a **continuum** of options.

Here are compassionate, practical pivots we use when a child (or classroom) is struggling:

Step 1: Intensify supports before changing placement

- Add coaching, consultation, or specialist collaboration
- Increase embedded instruction opportunities during routines
- Implement peer-mediated supports to strengthen social access
- Revisit communication supports (AAC, visuals, choice boards, modeling)

Step 2: Adjust the “dose” of inclusion (partial participation)

Some children thrive with a **blended schedule**:

- Inclusive whole-group for circle/song/story
- Small-group instruction for skill-building
- Short “pull-out” sessions for speech/OT or regulation practice. This keeps the *belonging and peer connection* of inclusion while meeting intensive needs strategically.

Step 3: Use the continuum thoughtfully when needed

If safety, sustained distress, or lack of progress persists despite strong interventions, we may consider a more specialized setting for part or all of the day—*with a plan to preserve peer interaction when appropriate* (shared playground time, specials, buddy activities, community events). The key is that decisions are individualized and revisited—not treated as permanent exile from peers.

The All Superstars Preschool checklist for a successful inclusion plan:

1. **Start with belonging:** How will the child be a true member of our class community?
2. **Define participation goals:** What does meaningful engagement look like during play, routines, and learning?
3. **Plan supports up front:** visuals, communication, sensory tools, adaptations.
4. **Teach skills in context:** embed instruction into natural routines.
5. **Build peer pathways:** structured peer-mediated strategies.
6. **Monitor and adjust:** use data (even simple observations) to see what's improving and what's not.
7. **Partner with families:** consistent communication and shared expectations.
8. **Have a compassionate pivot plan:** inclusion is flexible, individualized, and responsive.

Inclusion is love—made practical

Inclusion, done well, communicates a powerful message to every child: *You belong here*. The research supports meaningful benefits—especially in social development, attitudes, and community belonging—when programs commit to the supports that make participation real.

And when challenges arise (because they sometimes will), the most ethical response is not to abandon inclusion—but to **adapt** it, strengthen supports, and use individualized options with care, clarity, and hope.

References

- Division for Early Childhood (DEC) & National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (2009). *Early childhood inclusion: A joint position statement*.
- U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2015). *Policy statement on inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood programs*.
- National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP). (2016). *Preschool inclusion: Key findings from research and implications for policy*.
- Odom, S. L., Buysse, V., & Soukakou, E. (2011). Inclusion for young children with disabilities: A quarter century of research perspectives. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 33(4), 344–356.

- Dalgaard, N. T., et al. (2022). The effects of inclusion on academic achievement, socioemotional development and wellbeing of children with special educational needs: A systematic review and meta-analysis.
- Chang, Y.-C., & Locke, J. (2016). A systematic review of peer-mediated interventions for children with autism spectrum disorder.
- Gülboy, E., Yucesoy-Ozkan, S., & Rakap, S. (2023). Embedded instruction for young children with disabilities: A systematic review and meta-analysis.
- Division for Early Childhood (DEC). (2014). *DEC Recommended Practices in EI/ECSE*.
- European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education / UNESCO. (1994/republished). *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*.
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 24: Education)*.
- ECTA Center. (n.d.). *Federal requirements on inclusion (Part B LRE; Part C natural environments)*.