



**Early Childhood
Australia**
A voice for young children



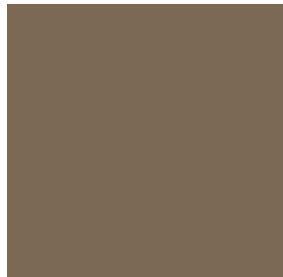
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Early Childhood Australia and Early Childhood Intervention Australia

**POSITION STATEMENT ON THE INCLUSION
OF CHILDREN WITH A DISABILITY IN
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE**





Overview

This joint position statement by Early Childhood Australia (ECA) and Early Childhood Intervention Australia (ECIA) sets out our shared commitment to inclusion in early childhood education and care (ECEC).

Its purpose is to create a vision for high quality inclusive practices in early childhood education and care. It will assist everyone in ECEC services, as well as support professionals, to fully include children with a disability and to achieve high quality outcomes for all children. It will also provide a framework for the development and implementation of policy and programs designed for all young children. The inclusive practices promoted by the position statement are characterised by the strong collaborative partnerships between children, families, early childhood educators and support professionals that are widely recognised as a cornerstone of high quality inclusive practice in ECEC programs.

The position statement reflects the broad evidence base and the collective values and wisdom of our organisations on the inclusion of children with a disability, and was informed by input from consultations with members of both organisations¹. It is part of broader policy work by both organisations. For ECA this work will focus on inclusion for all children in ECEC settings and for ECIA the work will focus on the inclusion of children with a disability in all aspects of community life.

Position on the inclusion of children with a disability in early childhood education and care

Our position is that children with a disability have the same rights as all children and additional rights because of their disability. They share with all children the right to be valued as individuals and as contributing members of families, communities and society.

Every child is entitled to access and participate in ECEC programs which recognise them as active agents in their own lives and learning, respond to them as individuals, respect their families as partners and engage with their diverse backgrounds and cultures.

This means that ECEC services and support professionals must be resourced and supported to the level required to fully include children with a disability and to achieve high quality outcomes for all children.

Rights of children

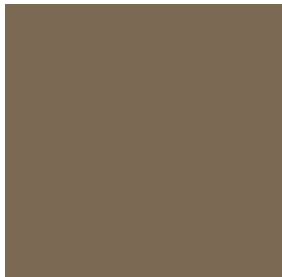
Our position is based on the rights of children with a disability, and these rights provide the foundations for inclusion.

Children with a disability share universal rights with all people, and share the additional rights of all children as identified in the *UN Convention on the rights of the child* (UNICEF, 1990).

The specific rights of children with a disability are expressed in the *UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities* (UN, 2006). Among other international statements, the UNESCO *Salamanca statement* (UNESCO, 1994) on *inclusive education* recognises the importance of inclusion of children with a disability in mainstream education.

Australia has its own legislation, at both national and at state and territory levels, which supports the inclusion of children with a disability (HREOC, 1986–2004).





Principles

Our position is also based on principles that are particularly relevant to the inclusion of young children with a disability in ECEC. They provide a framework for assessing policies, services and actions.

Best interests of the child

In all actions concerning children, the rights and best interests of the child are paramount, and young children's healthy development, learning and wellbeing must be a priority for Australian society.

Importance of families

Children's growth and learning occurs mainly in the context of their primary relationships in their families; and partnerships between ECEC, support professionals and families are essential.

Social inclusion

Every child has the capacity to make a unique contribution and to participate in a wide range of activities and contexts as a full member of a family, communities and our society.

Diversity

Diversity and difference are valuable in their own right, as are the commonalities among people. Understanding the practices, values, beliefs and cultures of families and acknowledging difference is fundamental.

Equity

Equity requires that each child receives the support and resources needed to participate, engage and succeed.

High expectations for every child

All children have the capacity to succeed, regardless of diverse circumstances and abilities. Children progress well when they, their families, early childhood educators and support professionals have high expectations for their achievement in learning and development.

Evidence-based practice

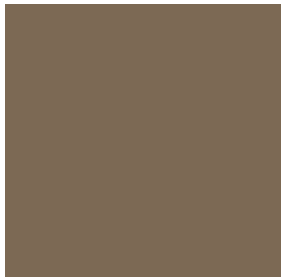
Evidence-based practice in ECEC programs is informed by the knowledge and experience of educators and families as well as findings from current research.

Ethics and inclusion

The foundation of this position statement in children's rights and related principles strongly links the practice of inclusion to ethical practice for everyone involved in planning and delivering services and programs. Ethical practice is a responsibility of the individual professional which asks them to reflect on the inevitable challenges and dilemmas of their work as they respond to families, children, colleagues and communities. It calls for consideration of the facts, values and assumptions that underpin our thinking and requires each person to ask themselves the ethical question 'what ought I to do?' (St James Ethics Centre).

The *ECA Code of Ethics* (ECA, 2006) and the *ECIA Code of Ethics* (ECIA) provide a framework to support practitioners in beginning this process.





Why do we need a joint statement?

ECEC settings were not initially designed with children with a disability in mind. As the result of policies of routine institutionalisation, children with a disability were excluded from the community during the first half of the twentieth century as services for children expanded significantly (Mellor, 1990). In the 1970s, early childhood intervention programs were established as a separate set of services for children with a disability and their families. As a consequence, the early childhood education and care and early childhood intervention professions and sectors developed independently.

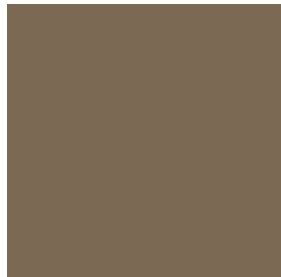
The past four decades have seen rapid development in our knowledge about child development and learning, and about social justice and social inclusion. There is a large body of evidence which indicates that the relationships, interactions and experiences in children's early lives have a profound influence on early brain development and future life outcomes (Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) and further evidence both that high quality early childhood programs make a difference (Sylva et al., 2008) and that the indicators of high quality can be identified (Galinsky, 2006). ECEC services and programs in all settings are striving to provide optimal learning environments for all children, regardless of their social, cultural, or ethnic background or their ability. Children with a disability are now recognised as contributing members of our community.

Research evidence indicates that children in inclusive programs generally do at least as well as children in specialised programs. There are benefits for children with and without disabilities, particularly with respect to their social development. Specific teaching strategies are an important contributor to child outcomes and collaboration among parents, teachers, and specialists is a cornerstone of high quality inclusion. Families of children with a disability generally view inclusion favourably (National Professional Development Centre on Inclusion, 2009).

The introduction of Australia's first *National Quality Framework* (NQF) (DEEWR, 2012) is a powerful driver for achieving inclusion. The *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) is a core part of the NQF and provides a strong theoretical and philosophical foundation for respecting diversity and acting for equity and inclusion for all children in ECEC programs. The service delivery standards and quality practices now required under the NQF strengthen the regulatory basis for action.

Within the context of the NQF, inclusion involves early childhood educators practising high expectations in supporting children with a disability to achieve learning and development outcomes consistent with those identified for all children, including that:

- Children have a strong sense of identity.
- Children are connected with and contribute to their world.
- Children have a strong sense of wellbeing.
- Children are confident and involved learners.
- Children are effective communicators.



Areas for action

Early Childhood Australia and Early Childhood Intervention Australia have identified that action is required by:

- the early childhood education and care and early childhood intervention professions
- service providers, educators and support professionals
- governments, organisations and institutions including education and allied health training providers.

One common concern across the three areas is the need to build the capacity of ECEC and support professionals to support high quality inclusion. This calls for the provision of relevant undergraduate and postgraduate course content; ongoing professional development (including joint professional development) and mentoring; and the articulation of a shared set of standards for the practice of inclusion.

The early childhood education and care and early childhood intervention professions

Inclusion of children with a disability requires collaboration between the early childhood education and care and early childhood intervention fields to achieve the best outcomes for children. This includes:

- leaders at all levels in the sectors working to build positive attitudes, beliefs and values about inclusion in their professional communities
- ECEC educators and support professionals working together to develop shared knowledge, common language and mutually supportive practice
- strengthening the contribution made by all members of the team, particularly focusing on:

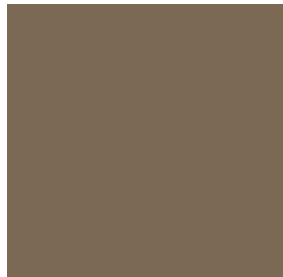
- the child as a contributor to their own and others' learning
 - family members as significant partners in their child's learning and as informed decision makers in supporting their child's ongoing education and care
 - cooperation between early childhood educators and support professionals in adapting curriculum and providing additional resources, based on children's and families' strengths and according to need.
- support for effective and positive transitions between and across settings for children and families.

Service providers, educators and support professionals

Inclusion of children with a disability requires:

- program philosophies that reflect shared assumptions about inclusion, the valuing of diversity, collaboration and partnership and what constitutes high quality inclusive practices
- interpersonal warmth and welcome for all families and children in their contacts with services/programs
- programs that acknowledge each child's strengths, meet each child's specific needs and abilities and support the active participation and engagement of all children
- intentional teaching that is interactive, purposeful and thoughtful and recognises the individual needs of each child
- environments that support meaningful positive relationships and friendships with peers and other adults
- recognition of and support for parents' advocacy for their child.





Governments, organisations and institutions

Including children with a disability requires support from governments, organisations and institutions to build strong foundations for families to support children's learning, development and wellbeing. This requires that governments, organisations and institutions acknowledge publicly the importance of children's services that practise high quality inclusion for all children and implement a systems approach to inclusion at all levels, including:

- service and funding systems that are easy for families and service providers to navigate
- readily available, accurate and comprehensive information about disabilities and related services for families
- information for the community that breaks down attitudinal barriers
- full access to physical environments in services and the broader community
- easy access to high quality inclusive ECEC services and programs across all service types and settings
- ready availability of additional educators, inclusion support facilitators and other support professionals
- a stable and skilled ECEC workforce with relevant skills, knowledge and access to ongoing professional development and support
- the introduction of national and state accountability systems that monitor increases in the number of children with a disability enrolled in inclusive programs, improvement in the quality of inclusive practices and improvements in the outcomes for children with a disability in ECEC settings.

Terminology

This is a national statement crossing jurisdictions, programs, services and settings that use a wide range of terms and concepts. The following list defines the terminology that is used in this statement. Many of these align with the *Early Years Learning Framework*.

Additional educator—refers to a person employed to provide additional support in an ECEC setting where a child with a disability is included and is also known as aide/assistant/learning support assistant.

Children with a disability—refers to both children with a disability and children with developmental delays.

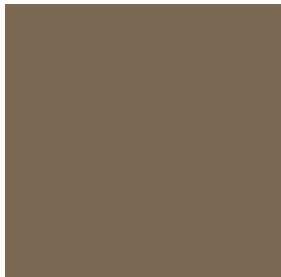
Early childhood education and care—is used here both as a generic term covering all ECEC programs, services and settings and to broadly describe practice in all formal settings attended by children in their preschool years. It recognises the deep integration of care and learning that characterises the healthy development of young children and has implications for the practice of all educators in all settings. Early education is the intentional support of early learning by skilled professionals and necessarily occurs *in an environment of relationships* (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).

ECEC programs—the range of relationships, experiences and activities provided for children and families in ECEC.

ECEC settings—terms used to include the full range of ECEC and ECI services and programs under all types of auspicing bodies.

ECEC services—include preschool, kindergarten, centre-based long day care, family day care, mobiles, Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services, occasional care and in-home care services.

Family—parents or others who have primary responsibilities for the child.



Inclusion—it is acknowledged that ‘inclusion’ in the broader context includes children of culturally and linguistic diversity and children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds as well as children with a disability. For this position statement however the term ‘inclusion’ focuses more narrowly on children with a disability.

Support professional—refers to people with a wide range of qualifications and experience including inclusion support facilitators, early childhood special educators, therapists, psychologists, social workers, welfare workers and family systems therapists.

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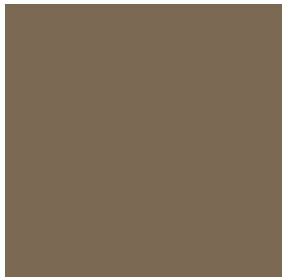
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Further work and feedback

This position statement on the inclusion of children with a disability in ECEC settings has been endorsed by ECIA and ECA in 2012 and is due for revision in 2015. However, given that this is the first joint position statement on this topic, we welcome feedback at any time. It is possible that an earlier review may occur.

We particularly note the need for further consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, support professionals, families, services and peak bodies; and that the position paper does not address children older than five years who attend outside school hours care settings.

In addition, both our organisations will be conducting consultations to inform the broader work referred to in the first section.

End note

- 1 Detailed information about the consultations is available at www.disabilityinclusionstatement.org.au.

