

Inclusion in Early Learning and Child Care Environments

Presented by:

Evelina Lukaszuk, RECE, MA, PhD Candidate

June 5, 2026

Hosted by:



Activity 1: Reflecting on our biases, attitudes, and beliefs about inclusion

How would you define inclusion (in your own words)?

Do you believe that all children are capable of learning?

Do you believe that all children should be included in early learning and child care spaces? Why or why not?

Identify facilitators and barriers that exist that affect your practice in the classroom.

Activity 2: Case Study: Challenging attitudes, biases and beliefs

Alejandro is a three-year-old who recently joined Rainbow Early Learning Centre. He has a diagnosed developmental delay that affects his communication and fine-motor skills. His family describes him as curious, affectionate, and happiest when exploring outdoors.

During his first week, educators notice that Alejandro often wanders away from group activities, prefers to play alone, and becomes frustrated when asked to participate in structured tasks. During circle time, he sometimes vocalizes loudly or moves around the carpet, which disrupts the group. A few educators quietly express concern that Alejandro may “not be ready” for the program and wonder whether he would be better served in a more specialized setting.

One afternoon, while preparing materials, an educator named Maria observes Alejandro in the block area. He is stacking large wooden blocks with intense focus, experimenting with balance and height. When another child approaches, Alejandro smiles and hands them a block. The two children begin building side-by-side, occasionally exchanging materials without speaking.

What assumptions might educators be making about what a “ready” or “successful” child looks like in early learning spaces?

How might educators’ beliefs about disability influence their expectations of children’s behaviour, learning, and belonging?

Activity 3: Community Mapping Available Resources

Step 1:

Open your internet browser and type in **Google Maps** on your computer or device and put in the address of the early learning centre you currently work at or support (i.e., if you are part of the leadership team or a resource consultant). Ideally, you would also walk around the neighborhood to identify resources nearby.

Step 2:

I want you to consider some of the following during your search:

- Local libraries (*identify what programs they offer*)
- Recreation programs (these might be offered in community centres, at schools, city programs)
- EarlyON programs (*identify what programs/services they offer*)
- Specialized programs (i.e., preschool speech and language, Autism Services, Infant Hearing, Mental Health Services, Occupational therapy, Behavioural therapy, etc)
- Public Health Services (i.e., breastfeeding support, Healthy Babies, Healthy Children, Dental Programs, Prenatal Programs, etc)
- Service Canada
- Community Supports (food banks, Indigenous services, etc)
- Any additional resources you think might be relevant to your specific setting

Step 3:

Begin compiling a list of community resources that neighbour your early learning setting. This community map will help you support children and families.

Activity 4: Assessing for Inclusive Environments

Step 1:

Choose an image that matches the environment you are currently working in, one that you support, or one that interests the group at your table.

Image 1: Infant Classroom



Image 2: Toddler Classroom



Image 3: Preschool Classroom



Image 4: School Age Program



Image 5: Home Child Care



Image 6: EarlyON Setting



Step 2:

While looking at your selected image, discuss the following questions with your peers:

1. Does the environment appear to be accessible to varying abilities?

2. What barriers to participation might exist in this setting?

3. What questions does this image raise about who gets to be included?

4. What accessibility considerations might you have for the environment?

Activity 5: Case Studies addressing educator dilemma's

Choose the appropriate case study that matches the environment you are currently working in. There are (7) seven case studies to choose from:

Case Study 1: Infant Child Care Setting

Eight-month-old Liam recently joined the infant program at Sunshine Child Care Centre. Liam has significant vision loss and relies on touch, sound, and familiar routines to explore his environment. The educators have noticed that he often becomes distressed during transitions, especially when furniture or materials have been moved. While other infants are beginning to crawl independently toward toys and peers, Liam is more hesitant to move around the room and tends to remain close to familiar educators. The educators want to support Liam's exploration, independence, and participation in daily routines while also ensuring his safety.

What barriers to participation might Liam be experiencing in this classroom?

What approaches can the educator take to adapt the classroom practices to ensure that Liam can meaningfully participate in the infant classroom?

How can educators use touch, sounds, language and predictable routines to support Liam's participation in daily activities and better support him during transitions?

Case Study 2: Toddler Child Care Setting

Two-year-old Noah attends a toddler program at Willowcreek Child Care Centre. Noah is a curious and active child who enjoys building with blocks and exploring outdoor spaces. Recently, educators have noticed that Noah becomes overwhelmed during busy parts of the day, such as transitions, group activities, and mealtimes. When the environment becomes noisy or crowded, he may cover his ears, cry, or move away from the group. At times, Noah has difficulty communicating his needs and may push toys away or become frustrated when other children approach him during play. The educators want Noah to feel included and participate in daily routines with his peers, but they are unsure how to balance his individual needs with the needs of the larger group

What barriers to participation might Noah be experiencing in this classroom?

What approaches can the educator take to adapt the classroom practices to ensure that Noah can meaningfully participate in the toddler classroom?

What changes to the environment and routines can the educators implement to support Noah's participation and engagement in the program?

Case Study 3: Preschool Child Care Setting

Four-year-old Maya attends a preschool program at Riverdale Child Care Centre. She has recently been identified as having a communication delay and started using an AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) device to express her needs and ideas. During group activities, Maya often requires additional time to respond and participate as she is learning how to use the device. The educator notices that other children sometimes answer questions before Maya has an opportunity to use her device, and group discussions move quickly. The educator wants to support Maya's full participation and sense of belonging while also maintaining the engagement of the rest of the group.

What barriers to participation might Maya be experiencing in this classroom?

What approaches can the educator take to adapt the classroom practices to ensure that Maya can meaningfully participate in the group activity?

What strategies could be used to encourage peers to wait for Maya's response?

Case Study 4: School Aged Before and After School Program

Eight-year-old Ethan attends a before- and after-school program at Salmon Lake Community School. Ethan is diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. During the program, he shows a strong interest in trains, maps, and building structures. He is knowledgeable about topics he enjoys and often shares detailed information with peers and educators. Ethan prefers predictable routines and may become anxious when schedules change unexpectedly. During group games and collaborative activities, he sometimes finds it difficult to understand social cues, negotiate roles with peers, or cope when activities do not go as planned. As a result, he often chooses to play alone or becomes upset when disagreements arise which causes him to disengage from the group.

What barriers to participation might Ethan be experiencing in this classroom?

What approaches can the educator take to adapt the classroom practices to ensure that Ethan can meaningfully participate in collaborative group activities?

What strategies could the educator use to support Ethan's peer relationships and sense of belonging while also building on his strengths and interests?

Case Study 5: EarlyON Program

At an EarlyON Child and Family Centre, a morning drop-in playgroup is taking place with infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children attending alongside their caregivers. The space is set up with a variety of play invitations, including a sensory table, a reading corner, loose parts for building, and a music area. During the session, educators notice that one preschool-aged child, Amina, is hesitant to engage with the larger group and tends to stay close to her caregiver. Amina appears particularly interested in the sensory materials but becomes overwhelmed when other children gather around the table, sometimes stepping back or covering her ears when the noise level increases. Her caregiver shares that Amina has recently become more cautious in busy environments and prefers quieter spaces at home.

What barriers to participation might Amina be experiencing in this EarlyON program?

What approaches can the educator take to adapt the EarlyON program to ensure that Amina can meaningfully participate in play without being overwhelmed?

How can the educators balance group engagement with individualized support in an open drop-in program?

Case Study 6: Leadership Teams

A leadership team within a multi-site early years organization oversees several diverse programs, including infant-toddler rooms, preschool classrooms, school-age before-and-after care, and community-based EarlyON drop-in centres. Across these settings, educators are noticing varying levels of consistency in inclusive practices, particularly in how environments are adapted for children with diverse communication styles, sensory needs, and developmental profiles. In some sites, educators have strong relationships with families and routinely collaborate with specialists, while in others, staff report uncertainty about how to respond to complex needs and feel limited by time, staffing, or physical space constraints. The leadership team is also receiving feedback from families that experiences of belonging and accessibility differ depending on the site attended. At the same time, educators express a desire for more shared guidance, professional learning, and practical strategies that can be adapted across programs rather than one-size-fits-all directives.

How can the leadership team address some of the concerns they are noticing across sites?

What is the most effective strategy the leadership team can take to ensure both educators and parents are being heard, and their concerns adequately addressed?

How might differences in sites (i.e., physical space, staffing, program type or community needs) be influencing the consistency of inclusive practices across programs?

Case Study 6: Home Child Care Setting

In a licensed home child care program, Samira supports a mixed-age group of five children ranging from 12 months to 6 years old. She notices that the younger children often try to join the older children's play but cannot fully access some materials or activities, while older children sometimes become frustrated with interruptions during more structured or imaginative play. One child, Lucas, a 3-year-old, is becoming increasingly independent but struggles with transitions, which can lead to emotional distress that affects group routines. Samira is trying to balance the needs of infants, toddlers, and school-age children while maintaining an inclusive, calm environment where all children can participate meaningfully.

What barriers to participation might some of the children be experiencing in this home child care setting?

What approaches can the educator take to adapt the home environment to ensure that all the children can meaningfully participate in play?

How can the educator better support a diverse age group in the home child care while also supporting each individual child?
