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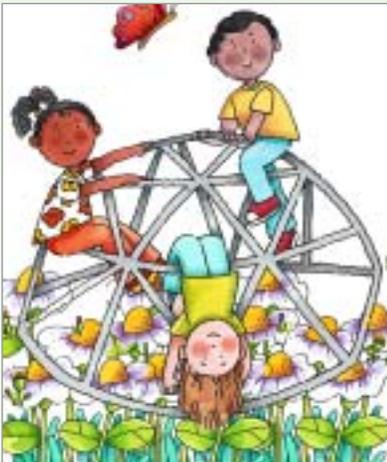
WORKING TOGETHER FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

BIRTH
through 5 NEWS

INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES AND PROFESSIONALS • VOLUME 5, NUMBER 4

"Natural Environment" and a "Least Restrictive Environment" Why are they Important?

By Rud Turnbull, Co-Director,
Beach Center on Disability,
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This article is translated into Spanish on page 2. Ver la versión española de este artículo en la página 2, y todos los artículos a www.birth23.org

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COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SYSTEM
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What is your “natural environment”? If you are an adult, your answer would probably be that there is more than one “environment” in which you are a “natural” participant. Your natural environment would probably be your home, your workplace, your community of faith, your civic association or club. Your natural environment is the place where you are a natural fit. Essentially the natural environment is the community in which you live, work and play. People feel a natural fit when there are no barriers or restrictions in places that are created by their disability or by the environment itself.

So what would be the natural environment for an infant, toddler or preschooler with a disability? Under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a state must provide early intervention services in “natural environments” to infants and toddlers, ages birth to three, with a disability or developmental delay.

Under Part B of the IDEA, a state must provide special education to young children, ages three to six, with disabilities in the “least restrictive environment” a term akin to natural environment. The natural environment for the infant or toddler with a disability, or the least restrictive environment for a preschooler with a disability,

depends on IDEA, state and local policy, and community practices.

Natural environments for infants and toddlers with disabilities will depend on what is natural for infants and toddlers who do not have disabilities. In turn, least restrictive environments for preschoolers with disabilities will depend on what is natural for preschoolers who do not have a disability. In our country the natural environment is often a family’s home particularly for infants and toddlers. Many children today also spend a great deal of time outside of their family’s home in various child-care arrangements, including center-based programs. All of these might be considered the child’s natural environment or least restrictive setting.

In deciding on the natural environment or the least restrictive setting the answer often is, “It depends”. It depends on more than the degree to which the infant, toddler or preschooler has acquired some ‘fit’ and whether the community has accommodated to the needs of the young child. It also depends on what services, supports and resources state or local governments decide to provide to the child and their family and where those services will be made available.

So, where does all of this lead us if

we follow IDEA's requirement that infants and toddlers should be served in their "natural environments" (Part C) and preschoolers should be served in the "least restrictive environment" (Part B)? We come to some understandings and these understandings are fairly straight-forward.

First: IDEA and other federal laws (for example, Americans with Disabilities Act) value "integration" (also called "inclusion" or "full participation") over segregation and separation. The principle of the "natural and least restrictive environment" is the law's way of saying this: "The natural environment for people with disabilities is the same as it is for people without disabilities."

Second: The IDEA Part C and Part B provide services that make

it possible for infants, toddlers and preschoolers with disabilities to develop skills and abilities for participating in the "natural environments" of their same age-peers wherever those may be.

Third: An infant, toddler or a preschooler with a disability will find that the natural environment or least restrictive environment may be the home, a center-based program, and/or a combination of both. State and local governments often create and fund settings and services so that, long term, the young child with a disability will indeed have a "natural fit" in places where those who do not have a disability fit naturally.

In a nutshell, early intervention (Part C) and early childhood special education (Part B) use such terms as "natural environment"

and "least restrictive environment" to express a goal and to reach an outcome for each individual child. What goal? What outcome? The answer is simply this: The natural and least restrictive environment for a child with a disability and their family will be the same as any other child and family.

The same! What a powerful concept! It proclaims the same profound statement that the Declaration of Independence announces: All of us are created equal in the eyes of the law. And the same profound statement that our Constitution announces: Each of us is entitled to be equally treated under the law.

Natural environments and least restrictive environments therefore are the foundations for equality.



“El entorno natural” – “el entorno menos restrictivo”: ¿Por qué es importante?

*Por Rud Turnbull, Co-director,
Beach Center on Disability
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¿Qué es el “entorno natural” de una persona? Si se trata de un adulto, la respuesta probable sería que hay más de un entorno o ambiente del que es participante natural. Incluiría el hogar, el trabajo, su comunidad de fe, la asociación cívica o club a que pertenece. El entorno natural de uno es el lugar donde uno ‘encaja’ de modo natural, esencialmente la comunidad en que vive, trabaja, y

se distrae. Uno siente un encaje natural cuando no percibe barreras o restricciones en esos lugares, creados por alguna incapacidad o por el entorno propio.

Así que ¿qué sería el entorno natural para un infante, párvulo o preescolar con alguna incapacidad? La Ley de educación de individuos con incapacidades (la ‘IDEA’) dispone en su Parte C que un Estado debe proveer servicios de intervención temprana en “entornos naturales” a niños hasta de tres años con alguna incapacidad o retraso en el desarrollo.

En su Parte B que un Estado debe proveer educación especial a los niños de tres a seis años con incapacidades en “el entorno menos restrictivo”, término equivalente a ‘entorno natural’. La definición de entorno natural para el infante o párvulo con incapacidad, o de entorno menos restrictivo para un preescolar con incapacidad, depende de la IDEA y de las normas estatales o



locales, y las practicas de la comunidad.

Los entornos o ambientes naturales para infantes y párvulos con incapacidades dependerá de lo que es natural para niños sin incapacidades. A su vez, los ambientes menos restrictivos para preescolares con incapacidades dependerán de lo que sea natural para preescolares sin una incapacidad. En nuestro país el ambiente natural, en especial para infantes y párvulos, suele ser el hogar familiar. Muchos niños hoy en día que pasan un tiempo considerable fuera del hogar propio en varios arreglos de guardería en otros hogares o en centros de cuidado de niños. Todos estos lugares pudieran considerarse ambientes 'naturales' o 'los menos restrictivos' para el niño.

Al decidir sobre el entorno natural o ambiente menos restrictivo la consideración suele ser "depende". Depende de factores adicionales al grado de ajuste que haya adquirido el infante, párvulo o preescolar y de la adaptación de la comunidad a sus necesidades. También depende de qué servicios, apoyos y recursos el Estado o los gobiernos locales decidan proveer al niño y su familia y dónde estarían disponibles esos servicios.

Así, ¿adonde nos lleva todo esto teniendo en cuenta que la IDEA requiere que los infantes y párvu-

los sean servidos en sus ambientes naturales (Parte C) y que los preescolares sean servidos en el ambiente menos restrictivo (Parte B)? Llegamos a algunas conclusiones bastante claras.

Primera: La IDEA y otras leyes federales (por ejemplo, la Acta Americans with Disabilities) valoran la integración (también llamada "inclusión" o "plena participación") en oposición a la segregación y separación. El principio del "ambiente o entorno natural y el menos restrictivo" es la forma que tiene la ley para decir: "El ambiente natural para la gente con incapacidades es el mismo que para la gente sin incapacidades".

Segunda: Las Partes C y B de la IDEA disponen servicios que hagan posible que los infantes, párvulos y preescolares con incapacidades desarrollen habilidades que les permitan coparticipar en los "ambientes naturales" con sus compañeros de la misma edad donde quiera que estén.

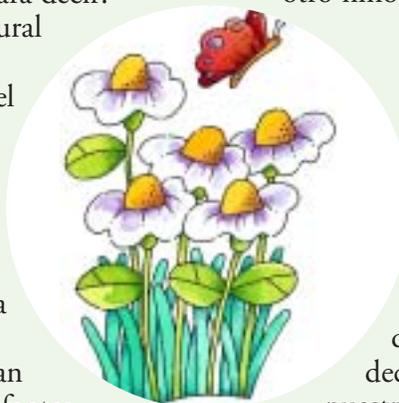
Tercera: Un infante, párvulo o preescolar con alguna incapacidad encontrará que el ambiente natural o menos restrictivo puede ser el hogar, un programa basado en un centro de guardería o una combinación de ambos. Los gobiernos estatal y locales suelen crear y ubicar escenarios y servicios para que a largo plazo el niño con una incapacidad logre un encaje natural en lugares

donde encajan naturalmente los que no tienen incapacidad.

En resumen, la intervención temprana (Parte C) y la educación especial de la temprana infancia (Parte B) se valen de las expresiones 'el ambiente natural' y 'el menos restrictivo' para expresar un objetivo y lograr resultados para cada niño individual. ¿Qué objetivo? ¿Qué resultados? La respuesta simplemente es: El ambiente natural y menos restrictivo para un niño con incapacidad y su familia será el mismo que para cualquier otro niño y su familia.

¡El mismo! ¡Qué concepto más poderoso! Proclama la misma declaración profunda de la Declaración de Independencia: Todos estamos creados iguales a los ojos de la ley. Y la misma declaración profunda de nuestra Constitución: Cada uno de nosotros tiene derecho a igual tratamiento bajo la ley

Los ambientes naturales y los menos restrictivos son por lo tanto los fundamentos de la igualdad.



Birth to Three System Update



By Linda Goodman

As you can see, the topic of this newsletter issue is primarily devoted to pre-school special education. Each year 85% of the children who leave the Birth to Three System at age three go on to receive special education and related services from their local school district. Sometimes that is a half or full day classroom program, and sometimes it means receiving only a related service such as speech therapy.

As we instruct all service coordinators, the earlier a family contacts their school district and starts planning for this transition, the better. We strongly encourage

all families to decide no later than when their child turns 2 whether they wish to refer their child for special education and related services. Decisions can be changed later, but if a family wants to have services available at age three, they need to start early.

Once that decision is made an official referral is sent to the district. The next step is to convene a transition conference with a representative from the school district, the parents, and the service coordinator. The purpose of this conference is to meet the school district personnel and to begin to talk about what comes next in the process. For most districts, the next steps involve: 1) convening a Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meeting to discuss the referral and formally determine whether further evaluation information is needed and how that will be obtained to aid in deciding if the child is eligible for special education and related services; 2) convening a second PPT meeting to determine eligibility, to develop the Individualized Education Program (IEP) that includes the child's individual goals, and to discuss the child's special education program and related services.

Some districts may prefer to combine the first of these two meetings with the transition conference, but others may prefer to meet the family in a more informal setting. The outcome of this process is to ensure that the child, if eligible, will receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) on their third birthday (unless that falls on a weekend or school vacation day). Children with summer birthdays have to wait until the first day of school unless the PPT has decided that the child needs extended school year services.

Those families whose children do not need extended school year services but who want to continue to receive some services until school begins will need to investigate services covered by their health insurance or services available by private pay, since Birth to Three services end on the day before the child's third birthday. That means investigating what insurance plans will or will not cover and the availability of private services. All of this takes time, which is why we say, "Earlier is always better." ♦

Selected Internet Resources

The following websites may provide you with information, ideas and resources. The websites listed here are not endorsed or warranted in any way by the University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System, The Birth to Three System or the State Department of Education. As with all information obtained from any

source, websites should be used with caution. There is no control over the posting of incorrect material on the Internet. Be aware that not all websites list their information sources. Do not accept information as fact just because it appears on a website.

www.fpg.unc.edu. This site includes research and education activities that focus on child development and health, especially factors that may put children at

risk for developmental problems.

www.circleofinclusion.org. This site is for early childhood providers and families of young children. It offers demonstrations of and information about the effective practices of inclusive educational programs for children from birth through age eight.

www.taalliance.org. This is the site for Technical Assistance

(continued on page 6)

Preschool Special Education Update: Expanding Options and Opportunities

By Maria Synodi

Professionals working with children, ages three through five, with disabilities are finding better and more innovative ways to provide a continuum of service options and opportunities. The goal is to provide children with disabilities, particularly three and four-year olds, with learning activities and opportunities together with typically developing children in the “least restrictive environment.” The emphasis on three and four-year old children with disabilities reflects the challenge created by not having universal preschool for all children while public schools provide a venue for such integrated learning opportunities for children in Kindergarten through Grade 12. Therefore, schools need to create such opportunities for three and four-year olds and/or collaborate with existing opportunities that may be available for young children in their community.

The search for an expanded continuum of services has been driven by sound educational practice as well as the legal requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA

addresses “least restrictive environment” (LRE) for children ages three through 21 in terms of the removal of a child from regular education. This IDEA requirement has come to reflect a set of practices that are best described as a continuum of services. The need for a continuum of services is further reinforced by other educational reform efforts associated with ‘America 2000; No Child Left Behind, Good Start Grow Smart,’ their learning and readiness goals and by the movement toward developmentally appropriate practice for all young children.



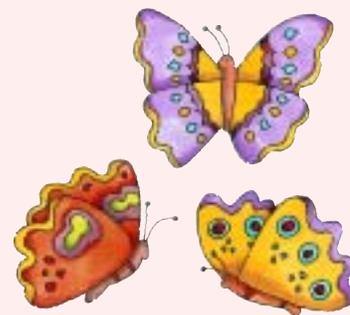
IDEA and these other initiatives recognize that all children vary in their backgrounds, abilities and interests. Therefore, when children are grouped together for educational purposes, their classroom is diverse with a wide range of skills, abilities and needs. For such a diverse group to benefit, the curriculum must be developmentally appropriate and individualized. The continuum of service options is designed to ensure an educational experience specific to each child’s needs while providing the child and teacher with the resources and supports needed for the child to be successful, gain skills and independence, and make friends.

The benefits of expanding the service options for young children with disabilities is clear for all children, families and service providers alike. Children with disabilities, as well as children without disabilities, benefit educationally. Integration opportunities provide children with disabilities age-appropriate peer models which stimulate their development and learning. Children without disabilities demonstrate more positive attitudes toward disabilities after being involved in integrated opportunities. Families and service providers benefit as well from the reduction in the

duplication of services and the better coordination of resources.

As we move forward in creating programs and partnerships we need to remind our-

selves of the importance of creating options and opportunities for young children with disabilities such that they are educated together with typically developing children in environments that are least restrictive. ♦



The Provider Perspective “Least Restrictive Environment” for Students, Ages Three - Five, with Disabilities

By George A. Coleman,
Associate Commissioner of the
Division of Teaching and Learning
Programs and Services,
CT Department of Education

A three or four-year-old child with a disability is entitled to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE), as is the school-aged child with a disability. That means that each child with a disability is to be educated, to the maximum extent appropriate, with children who are not disabled.

There are a number of examples of meeting the LRE requirement as it applies to preschool children with disabilities. Such examples can include but are not limited to: placing a child into a public or private regular education early childhood program; placing classes for preschool children in the child's home school or other elementary school buildings to build capacity; providing integrated, inclusive (e.g., reverse mainstream) classroom programs; and/or providing itinerant services to children at sites that children without disabilities are attending. Itinerant services are the special education and related services delivered to children, individually or in a small group, for no more than three hours per week within a variety of possible locations. Itinerant services provide an LRE for a preschool-age child because

they provide the supplementary special education and related services required by an individual child while supporting the child's learning and engagement in any activity or activities that children without disabilities would participate in before the age of compulsory school education.

When a classroom program is recommended for individual children, the school's planning and placement team (PPT) must first consider an early childhood setting or integrated (e.g., reverse mainstream) setting, both of which provide a child with a disability the opportunity to spend 100% of their time with non-disabled peers in an educational environment before considering other placement options. The overriding requirement in meeting the provision of LRE is that placement decisions for all students with disabilities, including preschool students, must be made on an individual basis.

Challenges with space, staffing, resources, time, travel, transportation, and other such factors are not sufficient justification for denying an opportunity for time with non-disabled peers. A unified and coordinated continuum of educational placements and opportunities designed to address the needs of young children with disabilities must be provided by the school district.

Consistent with the State Department of Education's emphasis on early childhood, it is expected that all eligible three and four-year-old children with disabilities will be afforded opportunities to have a high-quality preschool experience with typically developing peers such that they will be ready to enter school at age five prepared to succeed. ♦

Selected Internet Resources, (continued from page 4)

Alliance for Parent Centers. It includes information and resources for parents of infants, toddlers and youth with disabilities and to providers who work with children.

www.NCCIC.org. The National Child Care Information Center (NCCIC), is a clearinghouse and technical assistance center that links parents, providers, and policy-makers, researchers, and the public to early care and education information.

www.NAEYC.org. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has several resources that provide information on care for children with disabilities. Check out "Including Children with Special Needs in Early Childhood Programs" and "A Place for Me: Including Children with Special Needs in Early Care and Education Settings".

www.FAPE.org. The Families and Advocates Partnership for Education (FAPE), provides information and resources to improve the educational outcomes for children with disabilities. It links families, advocates, and self-advocates to communicate the new focus of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). ♦



The Parent Perspective The Benefits of Inclusion

By Lisa Allyn

As a parent of a child who is on the autism spectrum, I would like to share my story of how inclusion has helped my son, Christian, progress to where he is today. Christian attended a preschool that had a 50/50 ratio of typically developing peers to children with special needs for two years, and then went to a regular nursery school for one year. He then went on to a regular kindergarten.

When Christian started preschool he was essentially non-verbal, could not follow the routine of the day, and did not possess many appropriate social or play skills. Having peers to model every day, and with some teacher support, Christian was able to follow the classroom routine within a few months. Peers played an important role in modeling appropriate play for Christian. At home whenever I would bring out blocks to play with, he would throw them in the air and watch and listen to them hit the floor. That was how he played with blocks. One day at the end of his second year of preschool, I went into the class to observe. What I had expected to see was Christian not playing at

all, or using toys inappropriately. What I saw brought tears to my eyes.

Christian was playing cooperatively with a peer! The peer was building a structure out of blocks, and asking Christian to hand him certain blocks. Christian was not as involved in the actual building, but he was interacting and helping! Without the other peer, Christian would not have initiated interaction or play on his own. By the end of Christian's last year of preschool, he was using sentences and had started to interact with peers. Having the opportunity to hear developmentally appropriate language from his peers helped Christian gain language.

Including Christian with typical peers helped him progress in all his areas of weakness.

Christian is now in a second grade classroom and doing well!

Peers still play an important part in his day and I hope they always will. When the proper supports are in place, the benefits of inclusion for both special needs children and typical peers are invaluable.

Peers are strong motivators and models for social skills, communication skills, and appropriate play. At the same time, peers are learning that we all have different ways of learning and expressing ourselves. I feel inclusion has been a positive experience for Christian and hope it will be for other children as well. ♦



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State ICC Works to Promote Community Learning Opportunities

By Lolli Ross, Acting ICC Chair

Are early intervention services provided in natural environments meeting the unique needs of eligible infants and toddlers and their families?

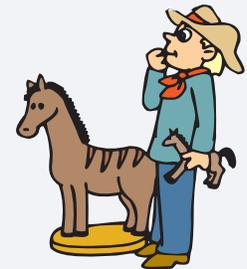
This is an important question being reviewed by stakeholders in the Birth to Three System as part of Connecticut's Continuous Improvement Plan and focused monitoring for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Part C. The State ICC, a council created to advise

and assist the lead agency, has taken an active role in ensuring that Birth to Three services and supports are provided in a child's natural environment.

The Community Learning Opportunities Committee, one of the ICC's working sub-committees, has partnered with Birth to Three to promote and strengthen playful collaborations between Birth to Three System programs and community providers. The ICC requested that \$25,000 of the federal funding for Part C be used for the implementation of community partnership projects to demonstrate how to increase opportunities in the local community for toddlers and their families in their natural environments. These partnerships will provide staff training and understanding of children with developmental and health related needs

and their families and thereby increase opportunities for meaningful participation with peers without disabilities in their local communities.

Ten programs were selected through a request for proposal process and represent a variety of creative playgroup and community activities throughout the state. Through this project, it is anticipated that opportunities such as these will continue to grow and Connecticut will meet its state goal of providing a variety of services in natural environments for all eligible infants and toddlers and their families that truly meet their unique needs. ♦



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