

iii. How *Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines* Support Instruction for Children with Special Needs

Inclusive early education is not just about placement in a program, but also active participation in social interactions and the development of children’s abilities and skills. Children at a range of developmental levels, including children identified with special needs, should be welcomed as valued members of the community by supporting active participation in all early childhood settings. (Underwood, Valeo & Wood, 2012)

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require that all early childhood programs make reasonable accommodations to provide access for children with disabilities or developmental delays (Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children [DEC/CEC] & National Association of Educators of Young Children [NAEYC 1993]). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education, “being meaningfully included as a member of society is the first step to equal opportunity, one of America’s most cherished ideals, and is every person’s right.” Research indicates that early childhood inclusion is beneficial to children with and without disabilities. Meaningful inclusion can support children with disabilities in reaching their full potential and result in broad societal benefits, including higher productivity in adulthood and fewer resources spent on interventions and public assistance later in life (Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Education, September 14, 2015).

Prekindergarten teachers are increasingly being asked to instruct children who may have disabilities. This can include children with special medical conditions such as seizures or feeding tubes, orthopedic impairments, vision or hearing impairments, speech and language delays, and/or developmental disabilities such as Down Syndrome or an autism spectrum disorder. Teachers should approach the inclusion of children with special needs as a positive opportunity for growth and learning—in themselves as teachers, in the child with a disability, and in their typically developing peers. While teachers may initially feel apprehensive about how best to meet their students’ needs, studies have shown that the inclusion of children with special needs can provide benefits to everyone involved, and that the attitude of the classroom teacher sets the tone for success.

Three areas have been identified as critical for ensuring a child can meaningfully participate in school and society. For children with disabilities to be fully integrated into and successful in school and life, they need opportunities to do the following:

- Develop positive social-emotional skills, including enjoying successful relationships with peers and adults, expressing emotions, learning and following rules and expectations, and interacting socially
- Acquire and use knowledge and skills, including early language/communication, thinking and problem-solving, imitation, use of symbols, and early literacy
- Use appropriate behaviors to meet their own needs, including adaptive or self-help skills such as toiletry, feeding oneself, and practicing safety

(Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center; “Understanding the three childhood outcomes”
http://ectacenter.org/eco/pages/training_resources.asp#COSFTopics (updated April 2012)

Teachers who are effective in including children with special needs in their classrooms acknowledge and welcome diversity in the classroom in its many forms, including ethnicity, home cultures, languages, and physical appearance. They are able to cultivate a positive attitude, remain open to learning new skills, and engage collaboratively with the family and other members of the team to meet the needs of every child.

Planning and Preparing

Teachers must take a team approach to successfully include a child with special needs in the classroom. This includes, first and foremost, open and ongoing communication with the child's family. As the child's primary caregivers, the family has valuable knowledge about a child—what she can do, how she communicates, what assistance she may need, and what strategies and adaptations have been effective. The family also has beliefs, goals, and desires related to the child's school experience. These should be shared openly so that the family and school are aligned in helping the child work toward meeting those goals. Special education and allied health professionals are also valuable members of the collaborative team. Special educators, speech and language pathologists, occupational and physical therapists, orientation and mobility specialists (for children with visual impairments), and behavior specialists may be part of any particular child's team as the child's needs dictate. These professionals offer a wealth of practical information and expertise that can help the classroom teacher. The skillful teacher will take advantage of their assistance in planning for the child's successful inclusion and with problem solving as challenges arise. Ongoing communication among the family and all other team members is critical to successful outcomes. This can be accomplished through regular meetings, phone calls, emails, and a communication notebook that travels with the child.

Children identified as having a disability enter the prekindergarten classroom with an individualized education program (IEP) that outlines specific short- and long-term goals, specifies therapeutic services, and recommends adaptations and instructional strategies. The effective classroom teacher will be proactive in reading these documents, participating in team meetings to update or modify them, and asking questions and requesting assistance with aspects of the plan that he does not understand or is uncertain about how to implement. When the teacher has taken the time to educate himself regarding the child's disability or condition, needs, strengths, goals, ancillary services, and family perspective, he can feel prepared and confident to move forward in addressing the child's needs within the classroom setting.

The teacher's role is to support the child with special needs in ways that facilitate the child's active participation in all aspects of classroom life.

All children need to feel that they are welcomed and included as integral members of their classroom community. Feeling fully accepted and valued is particularly important for children with disabilities or delays, as their differences may be more noticeable. Being present in the room or observing their peers is not sufficient—children with special needs must be engaged to the greatest extent possible with their peers, teachers, and classroom materials throughout the school day. Research indicates that many children with disabilities may not actively participate unless they are encouraged and helped through the use of appropriate accommodations or modifications. They may not know what to do with toys or materials. They may be accustomed to observing more than participating. They may have motor or language impairments that make it difficult for them to initiate or sustain participation and interaction with other children. It is important for teachers to observe each child's style, note the factors that seem to be hindering active participation, and work with the child's family and other team members to devise strategies to address these issues. Examples of such strategies may include modifications of materials (e.g., adding a handle or textured material to an object to make grasping easier), changes in the environment (e.g., creating more space in the dramatic play center for a child with a walker to move around), providing explicit instruction and demonstration of how to use materials, making use of the child's assistive technology devices (e.g., a speech-generating computer), or helping typically developing peers to communicate with and include the child with special needs.

The effective teacher helps typically developing peers build comfort and friendships with their classmates with disabilities.

Prekindergarten-age children are full of curiosity and interest in their peers, including those with obvious differences. In a safe, supportive setting, they will feel free to ask questions and express interests and concerns about their classmates. However, typically developing peers may not know how to approach or respond to the child with a disability. They may accept the child's presence but not initiate invitations to play together without a teachers' assistance and support. With appropriate information and guidance, teachers can help typically developing children to understand, accept, welcome, and include each child into the classroom community.

The effective teacher strikes a balance between providing information and not overemphasizing differences and disabilities.

Teachers can explain in simple language why a child is behaving or moving or communicating in an unfamiliar manner: "Charlie uses his walker to help him balance when he walks." "Miranda wears her hearing aides to help make sounds louder." "Steven is still learning to talk. He makes that sign to say yes." They also point out common interests, similarities, and strengths in the child with a disability. For example, teachers may make statements like the following: "Abby, Fernando really likes cars too. Maybe you could build a garage for your cars together." "Hey, I just noticed that Rafael and Sammy have on the same shoes today! You both like those special ones that light up when you walk." "Tonya, did you know that Yolanda is really great at puzzles? Let's see if she can help you find that missing piece." Teachers should also look for opportunities to place the child with a disability in a leadership or helping role, so that the child is not viewed by peers as only being the recipient of help.

Every child should have a way to communicate. If a child you are working with is not verbal, ask the team, especially the speech/language pathologist and parents, how the child gets his needs met, asks questions, and makes comments. If the child uses pictures, photos, or other communication devices, the child must have access to those at all times. Teachers may need to facilitate interactions with children who have communication difficulties. When a child cannot express himself verbally to other children, more adult support is needed to help facilitate communication or communicative efforts. Teachers should also recognize that children with communication difficulties may experience frustration when they cannot express what they need or want. These feelings may lead to acting out or aggressive behaviors. When teachers understand these maladaptive behaviors as the result of frustration and limited communication skills, they can focus on teaching the child more acceptable ways to communicate and can help other children in the classroom to communicate more effectively with the child.

Are children with special needs expected to meet the Texas Prekindergarten Outcomes?

The answer to this question is "It depends." Some children can be expected to work toward the same level outcomes as their typically developing peers. Other children may be able to meet these standards with adaptations in materials or instructional strategies. There are also some children whose cognitive or language impairments are significant enough that goals must be modified in order to be realistically achievable. It is important, however, not to assume that a child cannot meet the outcomes in each domain without conducting a careful appraisal of the individual child's capabilities and needs. If the child has an existing IEP, it can be used when the *Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines* are carefully reviewed to determine which are possible for the child to work toward without modifications or accommodations, which are attainable with some accommodations, and which will require modifications. These decisions require thoughtful consideration by the team, which includes the child's family and other professionals. Decisions resulting from this process should be documented in writing so that all members of the team are clear about how the child's needs will be met, what types of accommodations and modifications will be made in different domains, and how his or her educational goals will align with the *Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines*.

Skillful teachers observe all children for signs indicating the need for developmental or medical evaluation.

A classroom teacher may be the first person to notice unusual behaviors or possible delays in a child who has not yet been identified as having a disability or special need. Since early identification and intervention are most effective, teachers have a responsibility to share their observations and concerns with the child's family and to encourage them to seek an appropriate evaluation. Teachers should start by observing and recording the behaviors that seem unusual or raise concern. The teacher should describe observations in terms of behaviors rather than suggesting a diagnosis. For example, the teacher might say, "I have noticed that Alaina often tunes out and does not respond when I call her name. She also avoids eye contact with me and with other children," rather than "I think Alaina is autistic." The teacher should then schedule a time to sit down with the child's family or guardian(s) and share these observations and concerns. Teachers should provide families with information about how to locate an appropriate provider, such as through the local school district, if the family decides to pursue an evaluation.