



# Early Childhood Inclusion

## What It Looks like, How It's Done

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*uch has been written about the importance of fully including children with special needs in early care and education settings—specifically, about how providing these children with access to the activities and curriculum that typically developing children experience helps to ensure their optimum development. Policymakers and parents often see inclusion as an issue of civil rights. And many early childhood professionals have long espoused the value of inclusion for all children. But how do you actually include children with disabilities in early child care and education settings? What does inclusion look like? The following story attempts to put a face on inclusive practices, to show not just how inclusion can be accomplished but how it can directly and profoundly affect the lives of children, parents, and caregivers.*

The tight circle of preschoolers is beating on little drums, shaking maracas, and crashing cymbals in an explosion of percussive sound. Secure in the circle, three-year-old Emmy Threat is shaking a tambourine, her eyes wide behind pink-framed glasses, an infectious smile lighting up her face. Emmy, who has Down syndrome, is one of two children with special needs at Circle of Learning, a private pre-school in the city of Napa, California.

Some 20 miles to the north in Napa Valley wine country, four-year-old Monserrat DiSantiago rests on the lap of an aide at the Calistoga State Preschool Program, while a classmate gently rubs lotion on her hands. Montse, as she is known to school staff and classmates, cannot move on her own, is fed primarily by bottle and through a feeding tube, and has questionable vision. Although her needs are the most severe, she is one of seven children receiving special education services at this half-day public preschool.

The two programs—public and private—demonstrate the Napa County Department of Education's commitment to the full inclusion of students with disabilities in a general school setting from their earliest years. "We try to support the children wherever they would be if they didn't have a disability," says Andrea Knowlton, the county's director of Early Childhood Services.

That philosophy led the county to merge its special education classes with the state's Child Development Program eight years ago. "When we started on this journey," Knowlton recalls, "we met with the parents in the Child Development Program and said we're go-

ing to integrate. If we present it as, 'All kids deserve a high-quality program,' the parents are okay." The county also formed partnerships with, and provided training for staff at, private child care settings, like Circle of Learning. "If you have a high-quality preschool program," says Knowlton, "all children can have a positive experience, whatever their needs." For Montse DiSantiago and Emmy Threat—and their parents—that positive experience is a direct result of inclusion.

There's the usual tumult of a classroom filled with three- to five-year-olds at Calistoga State Preschool. The 20 students, most of them Spanish-speaking, are working puzzles, painting, playing with building blocks, sharing a snack, or occasionally just dashing about. But one boy has picked up a little vibrating toy and is holding it to Montse's face as she sits in a wheelchair. The little girl clearly enjoys the sensation.

"The majority of the kids like helping her," says site supervisor Rose LeClerc. Among the special education students with individualized education programs (IEPs) in her classroom are children with speech and language delays, autism, Down syndrome, and, like Montse, multiple disabilities. But with a staff/student ratio of one to five, "it's not just the IEP kids who get one-on-one attention," LeClerc says. And, other than Montse and a girl with Down syndrome, it's impossible to identify those other students with special needs. They are all just children, simply being children.

Montse requires the most one-on-one time from staff,

# C.L.O.U.D.S Preschool

## Creating Learning Opportunities and Understanding Differences in Students

Etiwanda Elementary School District  
San Bernardino County

### Qualities of C.L.O.U.D.S

- A vision of inclusion
- Relationships with families; the opportunity to get to know families at one central site
- A focus on accountability; the program coordinator regularly visits classrooms to observe teachers and document strategies

### Recommendations for Other Sites

- Try not to grow too quickly.
- Include rest rooms in the classrooms.
- Provide computers in each classroom from the start.
- Hire staff dedicated to the vision of the program.
- Ask for help from others early in the program development.
- Immediately form a team to delegate various program development responsibilities.
- Start delegating tasks immediately.
- Create your inclusion picture first, including the vision and goals, with the help of a team facilitator or consultant.
- Schedule enough time for planning and reflection.
- Partner with the site principal at the beginning to establish a long-term working relationship.
- Keep parents involved.

—Adapted from interviews conducted by Kathleen Sadao, PhD

For more about C.L.O.U.D.S, go to [www.scoe.net/SEEDS/pdf/CA\\_SpotlightEtiwandaCLOUDS2010.pdf](http://www.scoe.net/SEEDS/pdf/CA_SpotlightEtiwandaCLOUDS2010.pdf).

# The Face of Preschool Inclusion

but her classmates pitch in, too. “The kids like to put lotion on her hands or play with shiny strings or beads,” says aide Bianca Ruiz. “And one child is always protecting her and puts on her sweater whenever we are going out.”



Sandra DiSantiago, Montse’s mother, says her daughter is “bored” when she doesn’t come to school, “She likes movement and music; she likes to see the activity with the kids playing and talking.” DiSantiago says she is “happy with the school because it’s mixed” and not limited to children with special needs. Her daughter

is, as she notes, “a very popular girl.” And except when she is being fed, Montse has the attention of at least one classmate, and often of several.

Calistoga State Preschool is inclusive not just of children with disabilities, but of parents, as well. DiSantiago and other parents are encouraged to participate in the classroom and other school activities. There are family nights once a month, with programs that are sometimes educational, sometimes simply fun. “When you have a positive experience with your child with special needs at the beginning, it influences the relationship forward,” says Knowlton.

On a table in the classroom is Montse’s book, a three-ring binder full of instructions on how to interact with her during the day. The book, compiled by her physical therapists, includes such suggestions as “Always tell me what we are doing before we do it,” “It’s scary to be moved suddenly,” and “I like to have kids talk to me and show me things.” What teachers come to realize is that, while they are helpful for Montse, these suggestions are good to keep in mind for other children, as well. Oftentimes successful inclusive practice amounts to just good educational practice.

When it’s time to play outside, Montse is strapped into a walker that allows her legs to swing freely as she is pushed, and then she gets to be another kid on the playground. She circles the area while the other kids pass by on tricycles or build castles in the sandbox. While her mother believes that Montse benefits from the “mixed” classroom, the staff believes the other children benefit, as well. “The kids don’t sense who is in special education,” says assistant Rosa Hutado, who has worked at the school for nine years. “I love the way all the children play together.” And teachers and parents both know that an inclusive setting is more accurately reflective of the world outside the classroom, which is not divided into “special” and “general.”

It is no accident that Jeremy Threat and Jennifer Giese have brought their daughter Emmy to school at Circle of Learning. She is here, in this setting, they say, “to reach whatever maximum potential she can.” Emmy was born with Down syndrome, and “right off the bat, the most important thing was that she not be held back,” says Threat. “What challenges her, pushes her forward, is being part of the normal experience of childhood.” So they chose Circle of Learning, where Emmy is one of only two children with special needs among the 24 attendees.

(The other, a boy, has expressive speech delay.)

As always, Emmy's classmates are excited to see her and try to give her hugs. "The other kids dote on her," says director Diane Rosecrans. As at other private child care agencies partnering with the county, there are fewer children with special needs in the mix than in the public programs. "Two or three children with IEPs is ideal," says Rosecrans, who received training, as her certificate says, in providing "inclusive options for all children, including those with special needs." She then trained her staff. "It's just about accommodating differences," she says. "We do that all the time anyway."

Emmy was not yet three when her parents enrolled her at Circle of Learning. She wasn't quite walking yet or speaking very much. As Rosecrans recalls, "We just said to the other kids, 'She's little; she's young, so be careful.' We never said that she was different." Within a couple of months, Emmy was walking, soon she was talking and learning—and following—the school routine. "Her parents have set the bar for her," Rosecrans says. "They're not putting limitations on her and neither are we."

In her little denim skirt, pink sweater, and patent leather Mary Janes, Emmy joins the "cub" class for two- and three-year-olds, where the teaching primarily focuses on acquiring social skills. When cubs are developmentally ready, they move to the "bear" room for four- and five-year-olds getting ready for elementary school.

Emmy "fits in well with the other kids," says her mother. Whether working a puzzle with another girl, doing the Hokey Pokey with the other three-year-olds, or painting a watercolor on the playground, Emmy is "just one of the group," says Eileen Ailman, a special education teacher who visits the school every week. "The kids don't recognize the differences now, and with a full inclusion model, they will grow up more accepting of differences."

Whether public or private, Napa preschools are served by the county's special education teachers, and all have staff members trained to work with every, child regardless of need. "We hire people who believe in inclusion," says Knowlton. "That's what we value." ♦

—Janet Mandelstam

## Definition of Early Childhood Inclusion

"Early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society. The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential. The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high-quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and supports."

— from the joint position statement on inclusion from the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

Santa Clara County  
Office of Education

"The fear fact of 'Oh my gosh, I'm not the expert. I'm going to do something wrong with the child with whatever disability they may have.' Well, guess what! All children need the same thing. They need a warm caring teacher, caregiver. And you start from there. You build relationships with those children, and you just take their cues and you learn what they need and you adapt. You build a relationship with the families. So what [learning about inclusion] did for me personally is that it helped me understand that I was already doing many of the things that are important for all children, even those with disabilities . . . so what it did was help calm my fears personally. And I was able to then go back to the team and say, 'Hey. We're kind of doing this already, folks!' We have this odd notion that we have to do something so different for children with disabilities. But in essence we're already doing what we need to do. And that's being caring and responsive teachers to these children and these families. . . . We might have to change something a little bit in the environment, like the adaptive chair, or we might have to make larger pictures for children who have seeing impairments. Well, we can do that. It's just a matter of being in tune with the children and being responsive to them"

—Cindi Kessler, Early Care and Early Childhood Education Teacher

For more about the Inclusion Collaborative, go to [www.scoe.net/SEEDS/pdf/CA\\_SpotlightSCCInclusion%20Collaborative2009.pdf](http://www.scoe.net/SEEDS/pdf/CA_SpotlightSCCInclusion%20Collaborative2009.pdf).

## The Napa Program: An Overview

*Adapted from the work of Kathleen Sadao, PhD, SEEDS Program Specialist*

The Napa County Office of Education's (NCOE) Early Childhood Services department is a county-operated program serving young children birth to five with and without disabilities. NCOE's Napa Infant and Preschool Programs (NIPP) provides the early childhood special education (ECSE) services throughout the county to young children with disabilities and their families, with a fundamental belief in inclusion and an educational philosophy that promotes a focus on each child's development within the context of family, culture, and community. NIPP provides several service options to young children with disabilities: direct service, where the ECSE teacher or assistant provides intervention within the preschool classroom;

program consultation, where staff share strategies with the preschool providers; and home visits, where staff visit families in their homes and offer information concerning a child's progress, listen to parent's concerns and suggestions, and recommend community resources.

The full inclusion model was fully embraced by NIPP in 1999, although it has been evolving for 17 years. Program staff and administrators jointly develop a three-year program plan that is revisited annually. The program has four areas of focus: evidence-based practice, program design, teaming, and vision. Director Andrea Knowlton emphasizes the importance of this kind of planning over time, with changes made in direct response to evaluations and input from staff and families. However, this model of continuous improvement is not the only thing Knowlton does to ensure success. She also selects staff members who promote a full-inclusion philosophy, encourages independence in her staff, provides support and latitude in staff decision-making, and promotes both intra-agency and interagency planning across staff and programs.

One of the many unique features of Napa County early childhood special education is its integrated therapy approach to service provision. Staff

members—including an early childhood special education teacher, a speech and language specialist, a motor therapist, and an early intervention assistant—have received extensive training on a transdisciplinary team method of working with children during their daily activities. The program has also taken advantage of such resources as the Creative Curriculum, the California Preschool Learning Foundations, and the Early Childhood Rating Scale to create a play-based environment where children learn through doing.

Knowlton is a determined leader, devoted to developing networks, maintaining relationships in her community, and ensuring that all children in Napa County are able to benefit from quality preschool.

For Kathleen Sadao's complete article, go to [www.scoe.net/SEEDS/pdf/CA\\_SpotlightNCOEPreschool2009.pdf](http://www.scoe.net/SEEDS/pdf/CA_SpotlightNCOEPreschool2009.pdf).

## What Is Meant by Access, Participation, and Supports?

**Access** means providing a wide range of activities and environments for every child by removing physical barriers and offering multiple ways to promote learning and development.

**Participation** means using a range of instructional approaches to promote engagement in play and learning activities and a sense of belonging for every child.

**Supports** refer to broader aspects of the system, such as professional development, incentives for inclusion, and opportunities for communication and collaboration among families and professionals to assure high-quality inclusion.

— from the *Joint Position Statement of the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)*, available as a free download from [http://community.fpg.unc.edu/resources/articles/Early\\_Childhood\\_Inclusion\\_Summary](http://community.fpg.unc.edu/resources/articles/Early_Childhood_Inclusion_Summary)

## Key Indicators of Effective Programs

- Administrative support and involvement at the superintendent level
- Philosophical statement (mission, vision) for inclusion
- Models of inclusion
- Flexible staff
- Program manager as lead to the collaborative initiative
- The development and implementation of an action plan for success
- Fiscal support
- Professional development
- Resources
- Public awareness
- Evaluation and continuous improvement

— from the *Handbook on Developing and Evaluating Interagency Collaboration in Early Childhood Special Education*, available as a free download from [www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/fp/documents/eciacolbrtn.pdf](http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/fp/documents/eciacolbrtn.pdf)



To learn more about the inclusive preschool sites featured in these pages and about inclusive practices in general, visit SEEDS:

*Special Education Early Childhood Development*  
[www.scoe.net/SEEDS/resources/lre/spotlight.html](http://www.scoe.net/SEEDS/resources/lre/spotlight.html)