

PROMOTING EQUITABLE ACCESS TO DISABILITY INCLUSIVE EARLY LEARNING & CHILDCARE IN NOVA SCOTIA: THE FAMILY EXPERIENCE



WHY IS INCLUSION IN EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE IMPORTANT?

When children who experience disability are excluded from early learning, they are also excluded from **physical activity**, **social opportunities**, and different types of **play**. This can negatively impact children's health and well-being.

Parents shared that their children who experience disability are often denied access to early learning and childcare. Without provincial policies or frameworks to champion inclusion, families are often left to do the work of championing inclusion themselves.



Although inclusion is deemed best practice, there are gaps between how it is practiced and experienced by families. Families face many barriers to accessing inclusive early learning and childcare. These include limited options, high hidden costs, lack of supports, lack of resources, and discriminatory attitudes.



Barriers to access have a cascade of effects on families, resulting in invisible work, uncertainty, and overall negative effects on mental health and emotional well-being.

There is unequivocal evidence showing that **high quality, inclusive early learning and childcare** can mitigate the effects of social inequities and **promote child development and family health and well-being**.

Inclusion is necessary for children experiencing disability, and their families, to thrive in their communities and lead healthy, happy lives.

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ABOUT THE STUDY

WE ASKED

How do families in Nova Scotia navigate access to inclusive early learning and childcare programs for preschool-aged children experiencing disability?

WHO DID WE ASK?

- 17 Parents (16 mothers and 1 father) of children aged 18 months to 5 years old who experience disability
- 4 Key Informants (3 Centre Directors and 1 Inclusion Co-ordinator)

WE WANTED TO KNOW...

What are the barriers and facilitators to accessing inclusive early learning and childcare?

&

How does navigating access to inclusive early learning and childcare affect family life?

Money Makes a Difference

Costs and available funding were important factors that made a difference for both families and key informants.

It Takes the Right Village

Families and key informants described benefits to having professionally trained staff to support inclusion.

Disabling Systems & Exclusionary Effects

Stories of discrimination were often rooted in systemic ableism and milestone or norm-driven policies and practices.

Necessary Advocacy

Parents must consistently advocate for their children's needs and describe "feeling stuck" with limited options.

Impact on Family Life

Barriers to access have a cascade of effects on families, resulting in invisible work, mainly by mothers, to keep family life running.

Parents' Health & Well-Being

Stress, exhaustion, and guilt experienced by parents can significantly impact their physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

Drawing on the voices of families, we can make considerations that are positioned to **reimagine, retool, replenish, and reconnect** the early childhood sector by fully committing to equity, justice, inclusion, and belonging for all families.



HOW CAN WE IMPROVE ACCESS TO INCLUSIVE EARLY LEARNING & CHILDCARE?

Key considerations to promote inclusive early learning and childcare:

Recognize the rights of families of children experiencing disability **to access to, and inclusion** in, early learning and childcare programs.

Create and maintain an accessible resource portal so families can discover inclusive options in their local community and beyond.

Assist families in navigating systems by creating a single point of contact for those who may need support in advocacy and securing funding.

Focus on matching supports and needs. Eliminate any requirement for families to obtain a formal diagnosis from a physician to qualify for disability funding and services.

Families highlight the importance of inclusion for their children.

They highlight the need for more assistance in navigating support systems and finding tailored care for their children. Ultimately, we can start by **listening to their stories** and making decisions that **offer flexibility** and **prioritize inclusion and belonging**.



PARENTS AND KEY INFORMANTS ASK THAT...

INCLUSION BE VALUED

Support inclusion and **recognize** staff with expertise as providers of important and critical services.

ADVOCACY SHOULDN'T BE NECESSARY

Ensure universal access by adopting disability-inclusive and disability-affirming policies and practices.

PLAY BE A PART OF INCLUSION

Promote more play and social interactions between children who experience disability and their peers.

THE FUTURE BE CLEARER

Create better pathways to support children and their families during transitional times across growth and development.

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