

Gender and the Principles of Inclusion

The SpecialLink Child Care Inclusion Principles Scale is a tool to assess inclusive environments in child care centres. It is composed of six principles, which were designed to be incorporated into child care policies and programs in order to increase the inclusion quality of care and education for all children and their families. SpecialLink's six principles are:

- 1) Zero Reject
- 2) Natural Proportions
- 3) Same Hours/Days of Attendance Available to All Children
- 4) Full Participation
- 5) Maximum Feasible Parent Participation at Parent's Comfort Level
- 6) Leadership, Pro-active Strategies and Advocacy for High Quality, Inclusive Child Care.

You may be wondering, "What do these principles of inclusion have to do with gender?" Children are entitled to equality and fair treatment with regard to their race, cultural background, religion, ability and gender. When the SpecialLink principles are practiced in child care centres, equality for children across all these dimensions should be enhanced. Let us examine more closely the principle of Full Participation to determine how SpecialLink's principles can be utilized to create an inclusive, gender-equal environment and program.

The Principle of Full Participation is defined by SpecialLink as: "In fully inclusive child care centres, children with special needs have their needs met within the regular group activities and routines, through accommodations, modifications, and extra support where necessary." This means that all children, regardless of abilities, are given equal access to all play areas in the centre as well as all activities taking place within the centre. Emphasis is placed on making areas accessible and planning for all the children, but how much thought do we give to equality of gender in play areas and curriculum planning?

To be inclusive to children of both genders it is not enough to simply offer access to the play areas and activities. We need to ensure that the activities as well as the materials in our play areas are inviting to children with differing abilities as well as differing genders. This may mean ensuring there are as many pairs of men's shoes and suit jackets as there are dresses and high heels in the drama centre. This might also mean staff of both genders make a conscious effort to spend time in all play areas (female staff do not have to stick to the house centre while male staff help with the woodworking area.) All children should be encouraged to dress up, cook and clean in the housekeeping area as well as build and create in the construction or woodworking area. We must be very conscious of these gender stereotypes when working with children that are non-verbal or have mobility challenges as these children may depend on us to help them choose what play area they should explore. These children, as well as all others, should be encouraged to explore by making all play areas and activities inviting to all children, regardless of abilities or gender. All children must be given opportunities for meaningful interactions with their

teachers and friends in all areas and routines of the child care setting to which they belong.

It is important to examine how all children, including children with additional support needs, are treated in child care centres according to their gender. It is the responsibility of all child care staff to ensure that all children are given equal opportunity. Child care staff can make certain that this occurs by planning activities that are adaptable to different needs and abilities, designing play areas that reflect varied interests, and modeling anti-bias behaviour. All children should have the opportunity to explore all parts of their environment and avoid stereotypes that can limit their capabilities or expectations. It is only by ensuring this unbiased environment and curriculum that one can truly consider a program fully inclusive to the needs and abilities of all children in the centre.

One final thought: “If a society puts half its children in short skirts and warns them not to move in ways that reveal their panties, while putting the other half in jeans and overalls and encourages them to climb trees...their muscles will be different.”

-Ruth Hubbard, biologist.

What does this mean for children’s behaviours and beliefs as they grow up? It is our job as ECEs to examine these implications, challenge biases in order to defend the rights of all children, and protect children’s entitlement to equality.

References:

Freedman, Estelle B. (2002) *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*. Random House: New York.

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