Children with Disabilities

Recommended Practices
The Council for Exceptional Children’s Division of Early Childhood (DEC) has published updated recommended practices that summarize research-based practices found to be most effective in achieving greatest improvement in students with disabilities in the preschool environment and are not disability specific. The recommendations address eight different areas: leadership; assessment; environment; family; instruction; interaction; teaming and collaboration; and transition. Recommendations should be considered when planning programming for students with disabilities.

Initial Eligibility
Local Education Agencies (LEAs) must ensure that children who receive early intervention services before they turn 3 and who will receive Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) services experience a smooth and effective transition and have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) developed and implemented by their third birthday [34 CFR 300.124]. ISBE Guidance 10-2 Relating to Transitioning from Early Intervention to Early Childhood Special Education Services when Children Turn Three and Early Intervention to Early Childhood Transition Frequently Asked Questions provide more details on the transition process. During this process, the LEA must implement all required procedural safeguards, including, but not limited to, providing any necessary parental notifications and requesting any necessary parental consent.

Each school district shall ensure that a full and individual evaluation is conducted for each child being considered for special education and related services. The purpose of an evaluation is to determine:
- Whether the child has one or more disabilities
- The present levels of academic achievement and functional performance of the child
- Whether the disability is adversely affecting the child’s education
- Whether the child needs special education and related services

If the child is found eligible for special education services, goals, objectives, services, and placement should be discussed and determined. Section II of the Early Intervention to Early Childhood tracking form should be completed and returned to the Child and Family Connections Office (CFC) within 20 calendar days of the child’s third birthday.

A parent/guardian of the child, an employee of the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), another state agency, an LEA, or a community agency may request a special education evaluation for a child age 3 through 5. Within 14 school days after receiving a request for an evaluation, the district must determine whether an evaluation is warranted and notify the parent/guardian using the Parent/Guardian Notification of Decision Regarding a Request for an Evaluation. This document and others translated into other languages may be found on the Special Education Services, Required Notice and Consent Forms website.

Inclusion
The goal for local school districts, public schools, academies, and agencies should be to provide high-quality preschool experiences for all preschool-age children, including children with disabilities, in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Local school districts and/or special education cooperatives may determine through the IEP team process that a Preschool for All (PFA) classroom is the most appropriate placement for students to receive their ECSE services. The following information on inclusion is important in providing education and care for all students—especially for those with differing abilities.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) outlines the LRE requirements for children with disabilities, including preschool-aged children with disabilities. Since preschool educational environments are very different from the school-age educational environments, the U.S. Department of Education Office of
Special Education Programs (OSEP) issued a Preschool LRE clarification letter to states on February 29, 2012. The letter reiterates that LRE requirements apply to the placement of preschool children with disabilities and confirms removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment may occur only when the nature and severity of the child’s disability is such that education in the regular class with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. At the preschool level, regular classes may include PFA, Head Start, child care, and private/community preschools. The clarification letter stresses the preference to educate students with disabilities with their same aged peers without disabilities. IEP teams must determine the LRE for each child based on what he or she needs in order to receive a free and appropriate public education and not on “slot or program availability.”

Recent research supports the benefits and positive outcomes children with and without disabilities can gain from inclusion in regular preschool settings with typically developing peers. The following facts are taken from a research compilation by Erin E. Barton and Barbara J. Smith, June 2014.

- Inclusion benefits children with and without disabilities.
- Children with disabilities can be effectively educated in inclusive programs using specialized instruction.
- Parents and teachers influence children’s values regarding disabilities.
- Individualized embedded instruction can be used to teach a variety of skills, including those related to early learning standards, and promote participation in inclusive preschool programs to children with and without disabilities.
- Families of children with and without disabilities generally have positive views of inclusion.
- Inclusion is not more expensive than having separate programs for children with disabilities.
- Children with disabilities do not need to be “ready” to be included. Programs need to be “ready” to support all children.

ISBE’s Preschool Special Education website includes resources and links for these topics as they pertain to Early Childhood Education:

- School District Preschool Program Models – Placement options for children with IEPs
- Guidance for PFA/ECSE Blended Classrooms
- Preschool Inclusion/LRE website
- ECSE Services – Training and Technical Assistance Projects

Educational Environment Codes
Educational Environment (EE) codes tell what type of early childhood education program children with an IEP attend and where their services are provided. The EE codes are defined in Illinois by ISBE and reported using the Funding and Child Tracking System (FACTS). OSEP requires each state to submit a State Performance Plan (SPP) and an Annual Performance Report (APR) yearly. ISBE reports on the 21 indicators in the SPP. Indicator 6 focuses on preschool LRE. The data for this indicator is collected at the December 1 Child Count for children who are aged 3-5 on December 1. The Educational Environment Code Generator and Decision Tree for Coding Educational Environments can be used to assist in determining proper EE codes.

Early Childhood Outcomes System
Early Childhood Outcomes (ECO) are measured using authentic assessment practices through which providers and families observe children in their everyday routines, activities, and places, and collect documentation that illustrates what children know and are able to do in areas key to future success. Three ECO are used nationwide to reflect the integrated nature of child learning and development and make it possible for comparable data from a variety of assessment instruments to be combined for further analyses.

The three childhood outcomes are:
1. Children have positive social skills, including positive social relationships.
2. Children acquire and use knowledge and skills, including language and early literacy.
3. Children take appropriate action to meet their needs.

Upon entry into ECSE services, each child must receive ECO ratings within 45 days. Progress ratings are required yearly between February 1 and July 31. No exit ratings are needed; however, the last progress rating should be no more than six months old upon exiting enrollment.

The Early Childhood Outcomes Rating Generator and the Decision Tree for Summary Rating Discussions can be used to determine Progress Ratings. Additional information on the Early Childhood Outcomes System can be found at the ISBE ECO Webpage.

Additional Resources

Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)
- Determining Early Childhood Education Codes

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
- Joint Position Statement: Early Childhood Inclusion

United States Department of Education (USDE)
- LRE and IDEA requirements as applied to preschool children

University of Colorado, Denver
- Inclusion for Preschool Children with Disabilities: What We Know and What We Should Be Doing
- IDEA Provisions Supporting Preschool Inclusion