

## Learning Together: Why Inclusion Matters in Early Childhood

Every child is different, and that is something to celebrate. In early learning programs, inclusion helps make sure all children feel welcome, supported, and ready to learn. Inclusion benefits **all children**, not only those who need extra support.

Inclusive classrooms are built on the idea that every child belongs and deserves the chance to succeed.

### What Is Inclusion?

Inclusion means children of all abilities learn and play together in the same classroom. Children are not separated based on their needs. Instead, teachers adjust activities, materials, and routines so every child can take part and feel successful.

In inclusive classrooms, children learn, play, and grow side by side. Differences are respected, and children are valued for who they are.

As preschool teacher Chandra Evans shares: *"Inclusion means that every student is included with everything. If one student needs a tool to succeed, you normalize that tool for the entire class to provide peer support."*

### Why is inclusion important?

Inclusion does not mean all children learn the same way. It means each child gets what they need to do their best.

Early childhood is an important time for learning how to be part of a group. Inclusive classrooms help children feel safe, accepted, and included. They also help children build friendships and learn how to work and play with others.

In inclusive classrooms, children learn kindness, empathy, teamwork, and respect for



differences. These skills help children succeed in school and in life.

*"Every space in my classroom, curriculum, transitions—everything—has meaning and purpose to help every student be successful,"* says Chandra.

### How Inclusion Works in Preschool Classrooms

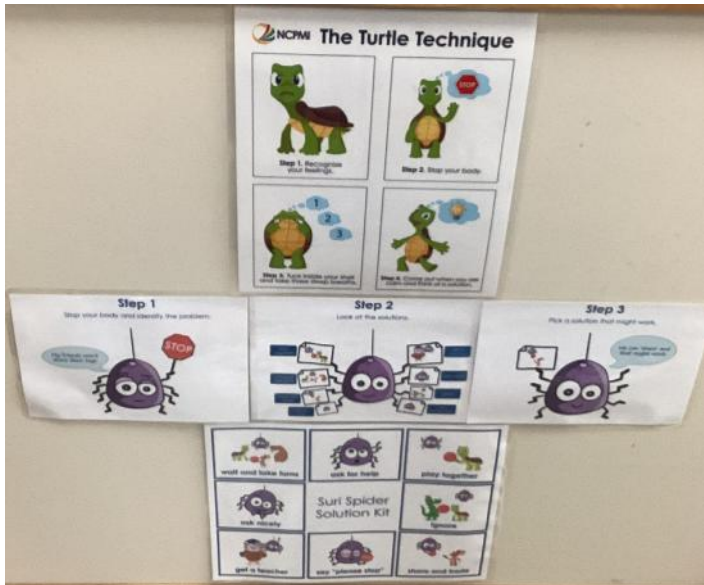
Inclusive preschool programs include children with disabilities and developmental delays alongside their peers. Children participate in the same age-appropriate learning activities, with supports added as needed.

Teachers may make simple changes so all children can participate, such as:

- Using picture schedules to show the daily routine
- Offering hands-on activities and small-group learning
- Providing flexible seating or play spaces
- Using adaptive tools like special crayons or scissors

- Making sure classrooms are easy to move around in

These supports help all children feel confident, capable, and successful—not just children who need extra help.



Kelly Tomaselli, an Early Childhood Special Education Specialist, shared that they use strategies called **the Big Five** to help all children in preschool classrooms, especially those who need extra support. And that looks like:

**1. Positive Attention (5:1)**

Adults notice and praise positive behavior more than correcting challenges. Example: A teacher says, “I love how you’re sitting with your hands in your lap,” before reminding another child what to do.

**2. Predictable Schedules**

Children know what is coming next in their day. Example: A picture schedule is reviewed each morning. Teachers say, “After snack, we will go outside.”

**3. Routines within Routines**

Daily activities are broken into clear, simple steps. Example: During clean-up, the teacher says, “First we put toys in the bin. Next we push in chairs. Then we meet on the rug.”

**4. Clear Behavior Expectations**

Teachers clearly teach children what behavior is expected. Example: Before circle time, the teacher reviews: “Sit on your spot,

eyes watching, hands to yourself.”

**5. Small Steps, Big Impact**

New strategies are taught and practiced one at a time. Example: For two weeks, the teacher focuses on giving more positive praise before adding a new strategy.

**How Families Can Support Inclusion**

In inclusive classrooms, every child benefits. Children who need extra support build meaningful friendships and gain confidence, while children who do not need extra support develop patience, leadership, and understanding. Inclusion helps children learn that everyone has strengths, everyone needs help sometimes, and differences make communities stronger.

Families play an important role in supporting inclusion. You can help by talking with your child about kindness and differences, sharing your child’s strengths and needs with teachers, and celebrating progress—big and small. These actions help create a welcoming learning environment for all children.

When children learn together, they grow together. Inclusive early learning helps children build confidence, respect, and a sense of belonging that lasts a lifetime.



## Who Supports Inclusion?

Inclusion works best when adults work together. This group is often called an **inclusion team**. The team plans ways to support children so they can learn, play, and participate fully in the classroom.

An inclusion team may include classroom teachers, special education teachers, therapists (such as speech or occupational therapists), classroom assistants, parents, and school or program leaders. Each person has an important role. Teachers plan learning activities, specialists help with specific skills, assistants support daily routines, parents share what they know best about their child, and leaders make sure the team has what it needs to be successful.

The team meets regularly to talk about what is going well and what might need to change. By working together, they help create classrooms where all children feel welcomed, supported, and able to learn alongside their peers.



In our community, inclusion is also supported by a larger group called the **Community Inclusion Team (CIT)**. This team includes educators and partners from local programs such as early childhood special education, community preschools, the Early Learning Hub, Pollywog, Head Start, Preschool Promise, and the Oregon Department of Education.

The Community Inclusion Team focuses on children ages 3–5. They meet regularly to share ideas, work together, and improve inclusive classrooms across the region. The team uses

proven strategies that support children's social, emotional, and learning needs. Most importantly, they share a strong belief that every child belongs and can succeed when adults work together with care and purpose.



## About the Contributors

The stories, examples, and visuals included here were contributed by three professionals who are actively supporting inclusion in community preschool settings through their daily work.

- **Kelly Tomaselli**, is a Community Provider/ Specialist. She coaches preschool staff on inclusive practices and teaches a Young 3's class at Clover Ridge School. Her work reflects both classroom teaching and staff coaching.
- **Sara Angel**, is a Community Inclusion Specialist. She partners with preschool classrooms and coaches staff on inclusive practices that support participation, belonging, and access for all children.
- **Melissa Bermel**, is an Instructional Coach. She contributed a written example from her work with a community classroom team in Lebanon. Her example comes from Cascades Elementary School, a Preschool Promise site, and shows inclusion in action.

Together, these examples show what inclusion looks like in real classrooms. They highlight the importance of teamwork, relationships, and shared learning.



## Inclusive Preschool at Cascades Elementary School

*Written by Melissa Bermel*

Cascades Elementary School Preschool is a fully inclusive program with two classrooms in Lebanon, Oregon. The program is funded by Preschool Promise and serves children who live in the Cascades Elementary School area. This funding helps families access high-quality early learning. Children of all abilities learn together in a caring and supportive setting.

The program has had a strong positive impact. Children who attend often move on to kindergarten feeling confident and ready to learn. The skills they build in preschool support their success in elementary school.

The preschool team works closely with the elementary school to support learning. Preschool activities connect to the same learning themes used in higher grades. This helps children feel comfortable as they move from preschool to kindergarten.

A key focus of the program is helping children build friendships and independence. Children learn how to play together, communicate, and solve problems. Teachers meet children where they are and support each child's needs. Learning with peers helps children learn from one another.

The program also supports children who receive early intervention services. Teachers work closely with service providers, so children receive the support they need while fully participating in the classroom. This approach helps every child feel included and valued.

Daily routines and positive interactions help build strong relationships. Consistent schedules and shared activities help children feel safe and supported. Cascades Elementary School Preschool is a place where every child belongs and has the chance to grow and succeed.

## Inclusive Practices at Central Linn's Early Literacy Program

*Written by Sara Angel*

At Central Linn's Early Literacy Program, inclusion is an important part of daily teaching. Preschool teacher Chandra Evans was asked several questions about inclusion. Below are her responses.

### What does inclusion mean to you?

Inclusion means that every student is included with everything. If one student needs a tool to succeed, you normalize that tool for the entire class to provide peer support.

### Why are inclusive practices important?

It allows typical peers to lead and provide peer support. It also allows non-typical peers to show their strengths. They learn together. It also helps those in need not feel different when typical peers are also using the tools they need to succeed.



### What is an inclusion practice that is most meaningful to your classroom?

The peer support that happens through inclusion is magical. Their peers move up grades with them, not their teachers. Having those bonds that just build through the years is essential.

### How have inclusion practices helped guide your instruction?

Every space in my classroom, every part of my curriculum, every transition, and everything has a meaning and a purpose to help every student be successful.

Chandra's classroom reflects these values. Learning stations are fun and easy for all children to use. Activities change each week to support early reading and math skills. Large, colorful buttons provide spoken directions so every child understands what to do.



Peer relationships and independence are encouraged. Children have classroom jobs, such as helping others know when playtime is almost over. One child may tell classmates there is "one more minute" left to play and wait for a thumbs-up to show they understand. After a clean-up song, children work together to tidy the classroom as a community.

Problem-solving tools are posted where children can easily reach them. These tools are taught during group time and small groups, and children use them during play. You may

hear children say, "I am a problem solver," showing confidence and independence in their learning.



### Working Together to Help All Children Succeed

*Written by Kelly Tomaselli*

As an ECSE (Early Childhood Special Education) Specialist, I help children with IFSPs learn, play, and grow in their community preschool classrooms. Last year, I worked closely with the teacher team at Periwinkle Child Development Center on the LBCC campus, partnering with them to make sure children feel welcome, supported, and successful with their friends.

When children learn in familiar classrooms with caring adults, they feel safe and ready to try new things. This helps them build confidence and enjoy learning.

To support children and teachers, I use proven strategies from the Pyramid Model, a research-based approach that helps teachers build strong relationships, create clear and predictable classrooms, and teach important social and emotional skills. These strategies are called the Big Five, and they help all children, especially those who need extra support.

I support classrooms by modeling strategies, coaching teachers, and meeting with them each month. We focus on one Big Five strategy at a time, practicing each for about two weeks before adding a new one. This slow and steady approach helps teachers feel confident and keeps learning from feeling overwhelming.



For example, the teacher teams wanted to help children be safe in the classroom—walking instead of running and following safety rules. We posted the expectation, “We are Safe in School,” on signs in the school and classrooms. Visuals, like pictures of walking feet, along with positive descriptive praise, such as “I love how Maria is walking safely to the rug!” and a thumbs-up for safe behavior, helped children understand what safe behavior looks like. At circle time, the teachers used a T-chart with pictures to review safety rules. Children are helped by pointing out safe actions and practicing safe behaviors themselves through music and games. These simple activities made safety clear, fun, and important for everyone in the classroom.

**The Big Five** also include giving more positive attention than correction, using clear schedules, building simple routines, and teaching children what is expected of them. These strategies help children know what comes next, understand classroom rules, and feel noticed for doing good things. When used consistently, classrooms feel calmer, more organized, and more welcoming.

Strong relationships are the most important part of this work. ECSE specialists and preschool teachers learn from each other and work as a team. ECSE teachers support and build on the amazing work preschool teachers already do. By working together, we create classrooms where children, teachers, and families can all succeed.

*“When ECSE specialists and preschool teachers work together, children feel safe, included, and ready to learn.”*

### A Note for Families

Families are a big part of this work. When children get the same caring support at school and at home, they feel more confident and ready to learn. The inclusive strategies used in preschool help children build social skills, independence, and a strong sense of belonging.

Together, we are creating classrooms where every child feels valued, supported, and able to shine.

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