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## The Links Between Successful Inclusion and Family Support in Child Care Centers

Families that have children with emotional and behavioral challenges often face great obstacles in finding child care that meets their needs (Rosenzweig, Brennan & Ogilvie, 2002). Lack of appropriate child care prevents parents from doing paid work, and from participating in other activities that contribute to economic security and to the wellbeing of the family.

In this paper, we discuss the role of family support in the inclusive child care center. Family support involves not only access to the services and resources that the family needs, but also an approach that empowers families and builds on their strengths (Family Support America, 2003). The findings presented here are part of a larger federally-funded qualitative study, designed to investigate inclusion approaches and strategies, and barriers to inclusion in the child care setting (Brennan, Bradley, Ama & Cawood, 2003). Nine diverse childcare centers across the U.S., nominated for their success in including children with emotional and behavioral challenges, participated in the study.

### THE SAMPLE AND PROCEDURES

The sample of center directors, center staff, and parents with one or more children in the center, is described in Table 1 below. More than half (59%) of the parents interviewed reported having a child with emotional and/or behavioral challenges enrolled in the center.

Individual interviews were conducted, either by telephone (in four centers) or face-to-face (in five centers). Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, with a range of 30 to 120 minutes. Family members and center staff received a \$30.00 stipend in return for their participation. Interview data were coded by

	<b>Family members</b>	<b>Directors</b>	<b>Staff</b>
<b>Number of Interviewees</b>	40	9	40
<b>Position or Role Description</b>	58% worked full-time; 25% part-time; 23% enrolled in education or training	Managed centers that provided for between 32 and 1300 children.  Supervised between 5 and 80 staff.	Worked as teacher, assistant/aide, service coordinator, inclusion specialist

at least two members of the research team, and entered into NUD\*IST (Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty Ltd, 1993) for further analysis. Coding and analysis procedures were guided by grounded theory methods (Morse, 1994).

## THE FINDINGS

Data analysis indicated that family support was important for inclusion in three ways, as described below.

1) *The centers worked to create and maintain “a family environment.”*

The directors and staff in the centers viewed childcare as part of a larger support system required by families, and recognized how important the support of the whole family was to the well being of the child. The centers were proactive in helping families identify their needs and linking them to appropriate resources, both within and outside of the center. One parent said that she viewed the center as ‘a second house’, indicating how important the support system provided by the center was in the life of her family. Similarly, in some of the centers, parents and staff noted that the center was characterized by a family atmosphere.

2) *Family support encouraged family participation*

Families in these inclusive centers learned that staff was committed to meeting the needs of each child, whether or not they had unique challenges. Staff

made great efforts to develop relationships with families based on openness, trust, and mutual respect. They got to know the families well, and appreciated the strengths of the family and the stressors they experienced in their lives. At some centers, staff was able to visit families at home as part of the program. This expanded the lens through which staff could view the child in the classroom, and helped staff to learn more about the needs of each family. These close working relationships between staff and families were crucial to the inclusion of children with challenging behaviors. The centers had access to both community and specialized health support that enabled the family to gain access to flexible and comprehensive resources and services. The needs of families were often dynamic, and ranged from food and shelter to intervention from mental health specialists. This partnership with families and with the community was important supporting the child’s continued participation in the program.

3) *Family support enabled retention of children with challenging behavior in the center*

The directors and staff recognized that providing family support was crucial to the success of the child, particularly if the child had challenging behavior. Many parents of children with challenges had experiences of having their child expelled from previous arrangements because of behavioral issues. However, in these inclusive centers, expulsion was a rare

occurrence. Instead the staff worked with the child and family to facilitate their retention in the program. A partnership with the family facilitated the sharing of strategies that supported the child at home and in the classroom. This consistency was important in promoting the child's success, and supporting retention. Access to appropriate support, including the provision of mental health support as required, was a crucial part of this success. In contrast to previous experiences when parents were often worried that their child care arrangements would fall through, the provision of family support in these centers contributed to the development of partnerships with staff, and the creation of a safe, stable and nurturing environment that promoted the development of the child.

## CONCLUSIONS

Families that have children with emotional and behavioral challenges often receive little or no support. Increasingly, child care is part of the natural environment for children and families (Lombardi, 2003), and thus it is crucial that child care centers are prepared to include children with such challenges. Children, families, employers, and communities can benefit if families of children with unique challenges are adequately supported. The findings of this study suggest that if child care is to be more successful in including children with diverse needs, there is a need

to make existing arrangements more comprehensive and to explore ways to integrate child care and family support.

## REFERENCES

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