

Dr. Sharon Hope Irwin speaks at the Child Care Assembly in Ottawa, November 19, 2023 ^[1]

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Good morning.

I'm Sharon Irwin, director of SpecialLink: The National Centre for Child Care Inclusion. I am currently working on a federal project gathering essential information regarding the impact of the Covid pandemic on the inclusion of children with disabilities in Child Care and Early Learning. The project continues our primary commitment to the universal inclusion of children with disabilities in Canada.

And the most important word in all of that is "disabilities." While terms such as "vulnerable children" and the "children of immigrants" and so forth are certainly important parts of the general definition of inclusion, people tend to use definitions of inclusion that leave out "children with disabilities" or, at best, put children with disabilities at the bottom of the list, almost as an afterthought. And I am here today to urge all of us to recognize that if we don't put "children with disabilities" at the top of our definition of inclusion, these are the children most likely to be left out, refused admission to child care, considered too expensive or too demanding to be included.

We all understand that inclusion of children with disabilities—children with autism, cerebral palsy, the blind—children who require special medical intervention during the day such as children with diabetes or severe allergies—these are the children who will need extra assistance and will be the most costly to include.

So while we are grateful that the federal government has agreed to fund more spaces and provide better wages in childcare, we must recognize that this new initiative does not do anything to require the inclusion of children with disabilities.

Will the new spaces—renovated or newly constructed—be mandated to include wide doorways for wheelchairs and other adaptations required to include children with disabilities? Will the new wage formula provide one-to-one assistance that some children need? Will the required Early Childhood training include skills for working with children with extra needs? Or are we missing this opportunity to fully include children with disabilities?

In 1975, I started working as director of Town Daycare in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia. Early on, we committed our program to including children with disabilities. We soon found ourselves providing tube-feeding, Braille and one-to-one special exercises. We learned that successful inclusion of children with disabilities means that the child with disabilities is in the same room with her typical peers, and that those peers are learning tools of empathy and support while they play with children with disabilities.

Town Day Care became a model for the inclusion of children with disabilities across Canada. And nearly 50 years later, Town Day Care continues to provide child care based on its principles of inclusion. If you went there today, you would see children with disabilities at play with their typical peers, and in some cases you would have a hard time picking out the child with disabilities.

And here I stand, 50 years later, in a hotel that does not provide a handicapped room, does not have a walk-in shower, in a country that talks about inclusion but does not have the essential regulations needed to make inclusion of people with disabilities universal.

This is an important gathering. We are fortunate the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, the Honorable Jenna Sudds, is with us. This gathering is an opportunity for us to praise what we and government have accomplished in terms of new child care spaces and higher wages for child care workers. And it is also an opportunity to send a message to government and to our colleagues that the definition of the word "inclusion" must firmly and foremost begin with "inclusion of children with disabilities" rather than as an afterthought.

I urge us all to adopt a definition of inclusion that truly supports the needs of children that we too often leave out—children with disabilities.

I want to invite everyone to enjoy a video visit to Town Day Care to see some of its inclusion successes with children with disabilities. Please go to the link to those videos below.

Thank you for this opportunity.

Sharon Hope Irwin

Director, SpecialLink:

The National Centre for Child Care Inclusion

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