

# Early childhood development and disability: A discussion paper <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Full report in pdf <sup>[2]</sup>

### Excerpts:

Despite being more vulnerable to developmental risks, young children with disabilities are often overlooked in mainstream programmes and services designed to ensure child development. They also do not receive the specific supports required to meet their rights and needs. Children with disabilities and their families are confronted by barriers including inadequate legislation and policies, negative attitudes, inadequate services, and lack of accessible environments. If children with developmental delays or disabilities and their families are not provided with timely and appropriate early intervention, support and protection, their difficulties can become more severe—often leading to lifetime consequences, increased poverty and profound exclusion.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) highlight how children with disabilities have the same rights as other children—for example to health care, nutrition, education, social inclusion and protection from violence, abuse and neglect. Ensuring access to appropriate support, such as early childhood intervention (ECI) and education, can fulfil the rights of children with disabilities, promoting rich and fulfilling childhoods and preparing them for full and meaningful participation in adulthood.

This discussion paper provides a brief overview of issues pertaining to early childhood development (ECD) and disability. It lays the foundation for a long-term strategic and collaborative process aimed at improving the developmental outcomes, participation and protection of young children with disabilities. Essential to this effort is dialogue between United Nations agencies and relevant stakeholders to identify sustainable strategies which build on existing efforts, and expand on multisectoral approaches to guarantee the rights of young children with disabilities and their families.

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### Inclusive early childhood education

Inclusive education is a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners—including those with disabilities—and can thus be understood as a key strategy to achieve Education For All (EFA). As stated in Article 24 of the CRPD, children with disabilities should not be excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability and should have access to inclusive, quality and free primary and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the community in which they live.

Inclusive pre-school and early primary schooling offers children with disabilities a vital space in which to ensure optimal development by providing opportunities for child-focused learning, play, participation, peer interaction and the development of friendships. Children with disabilities are often denied early years of primary schooling, and when enrolled—due to a lack of inclusive approaches and rigid systems—they often fail, need to repeat and/or are encouraged to dropout during this critical developmental period.

The CRPD and EFA initiatives promote inclusive education for all children, including those with disabilities and call for the provision of assistance to ensure full and meaningful learning and participation. In many countries separate schools exist for children with certain types of impairments, for example schools for deaf or blind children. However, these schools usually accommodate a limited number of children, often lead to separation from the family at an early age, and fail to promote inclusion in the wider community. In some countries children with disabilities attend mainstream pre- and primary schools, however, they are segregated into special classrooms or resource centres which are staffed by teachers trained in special education.

Education for children with disabilities should focus on inclusion in mainstream settings. While inclusion is consistent with the rights of children with disabilities and is generally more cost effective than special or separate schools, it cannot happen without appropriate levels of support. While additional investments are required, such as progressive national and local policy, trained staff, accessible facilities, flexible curricula and teaching methods, and educational resources, these investments will benefit all children.

For all inclusive early childhood education and learning interventions, positive attitudes and responses from and interactions with peers, teachers, school administrators, other school staff, parents and community members are critical. Assessing and monitoring ECD and school environments for promoting inclusion is an important part of guaranteeing appropriate educational opportunities for children with disabilities. Multisectoral approaches with effective coordinating mechanisms between such sectors as education, health and social

welfare are required to ensure early identification efforts, promote holistic responses and link school-based learning with home and community interventions.

**Region:** International [3]

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