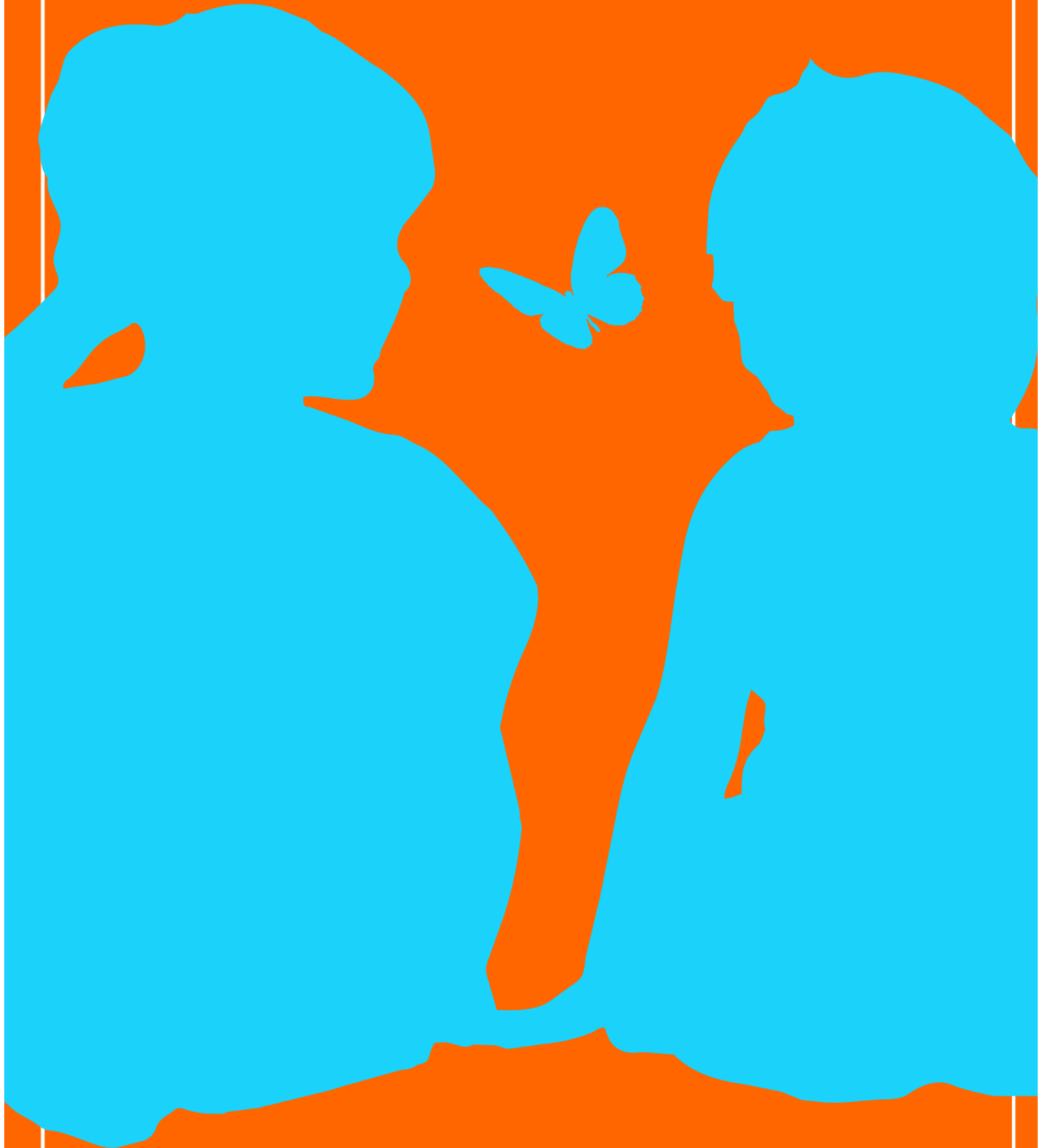


# Early Years

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The Journal of the Texas Association for the Education of Young Children

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We extend our sincere gratitude to the reviewers for their invaluable contributions to this issue. Their expertise, insightful comments, and thorough reviews have significantly enhanced the quality of the published works. We appreciate their commitment to maintaining the high standards of our publication.

Melissa M. Mifflin

Becca Johnson

Sicily Whetstone

Karen Rodman

Sara Moon-Seo

## Editor's Column

By Karen Walker, *Early Years* Editor

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Spring in Texas is a season of profound transformation. A time when the landscape shifts, the air warms, and we witness the quiet miracle of spreading wings. This issue of *Early Years* arrives at a similarly transformative moment for the Texas Association for the Education of Young Children.

As we celebrate the new growth within our own leadership, we are thrilled to welcome Dr. Mary Harper as our new Executive Director. Bringing her rich experience from TAMU-Corpus Christi and her deep roots in the AEYC community, Mary joins us at a pivotal time. Alongside our new President-Elect, Carolyn Callahan, and our Board President, Audrey Rowland, this leadership team is ready to advocate for our profession with renewed energy and vision.

The theme of this issue, acceptance and inclusion, is perhaps the most vital spring cleaning we can do in our field. It requires us to sweep away outdated biases and make room for the beautiful, diverse reality of the children in our care.

Rhonda Crabbs reminds us fundamentally of *The Power of a Pause* and why early childhood education matters.

Elizabeth Beavers provide essential frameworks for *Honoring Uniqueness* and striving for inclusive classrooms, ensuring that children with autism aren't just present, but are heard and valued.

In *Striving for Inclusive Classrooms* Sunmin Lee makes clear that before educators can truly support children with disabilities, they must first turn the lens on themselves — examining their own assumptions about "normalcy" and unlearning the ableist beliefs that can quietly limit a child's sense of belonging and opportunity.

Flóra Faragó and Sarah Savoy challenge us to look inward with their piece on *Combating Anti-fatness*, urging us to foster size acceptance so that every child feels safe in their own skin. The authors, whose combined expertise in children's prejudice development, anti-bias education, body image, and weight-related stigma uniquely positions them to address anti-fatness in early childhood settings, note that, consistent with fat studies and critical weight scholarship (e.g., Calogero et al., 2016), the term "fat" is used intentionally throughout the article to reclaim power and reduce stigma associated with the word.

Our cover for this issue serves as a metaphor for this moment. Just as those children watch a butterfly take flight, we watch as TXAEYC enters a new chapter of leadership.

Inclusion isn't just a classroom strategy, it's a commitment to ensuring every child and professional has the space to flourish. We are honored to have you on this journey with us as we grow, advocate, and together, spread our wings.

## A Message from the Board President

By Audrey Rowland, *TXAEYC Board President*

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Dear TXAEYC Members and Partners,

This issue of Early Years holds special meaning for our community. Centered on inclusion, acceptance, autism, and body confidence in early childhood, it reflects both the heart of our work and the future we are building together. Every child deserves to be seen, valued, and supported as they are—and as early childhood professionals, we carry both the responsibility and the privilege of creating environments where that is truly possible.

As you explore this issue, I invite you to reflect on how inclusion shows up in your daily practice—not just in curriculum or policy, but in relationships, language, and expectations. The work of affirming all children, including those with special needs, is ongoing. It requires curiosity, humility, and a willingness to grow alongside the children and families we serve. This edition celebrates that work and the professionals who lead it with intention and care.

This moment also marks an important transition for TXAEYC. After a year of change and reflection, we are entering a new era—grounded in our mission and energized by new possibilities. I am pleased to introduce our new Executive Director, Dr. Mary Harper, whose leadership brings both experience and a deep commitment to strengthening our organization and expanding our impact across Texas. Mary joins us at a pivotal time, and we are confident in the vision and momentum she brings forward.

Looking ahead, our focus is clear: to better serve you. We are actively developing enhanced member benefits and services, building new partnerships, and expanding professional development opportunities that meet the evolving needs of our field. You will also see exciting improvements to our Annual Conference, designed to deepen learning, increase accessibility, and create more meaningful connections across our network. None of this progress would be possible without you.

To our chapter leaders, volunteers, and stakeholders—thank you. Your dedication, patience, and belief in TXAEYC carried this organization through a significant period of transition. You showed up, stepped in, and stayed committed to our shared purpose. Because of you, we are not just moving forward—we are moving forward stronger. As we begin this next chapter together, I am filled with optimism. The challenges facing early childhood education are real, but so is the power of this community. Together, we will continue to advocate, to innovate, and to ensure that every child—and every educator—has the support they need to thrive. Thank you for being part of TXAEYC.

With appreciation and anticipation,

Audrey Rowland, TXAEYC Governing Board President



Carolyn Callahan is the incoming President of TXAEYC and brings more than 30 years of experience in early childhood education. She currently serves as Education Service Manager for Head Start of Greater Dallas, where she supports leaders who coach and mentor educators while strengthening classroom quality and family partnerships. A long-time leader within TXAEYC, she previously served as Vice President of Membership and has spent years advancing the profession through advocacy and leadership. Her focus is on growing and engaging membership, strengthening statewide connections, and supporting the next generation of early childhood leaders.

## An Interview with Dr. Mary Harper

By Dr. Karen Walker, *Early Years* Editor

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We sat down with Dr. Mary Harper, the newly appointed Executive Director of Texas AEYC, to learn how her years of experience in classrooms, coalitions, and higher education are shaping her vision for the organization. From expanding member engagement to championing inclusive practices across the state, Dr. Harper shares what she hopes to build alongside the Texas early childhood community.

**Mary, having moved from the world of academia at TAMU-Corpus Christi to leading TXAEYC, how does your background in research and teaching inform your vision for supporting our early childhood professionals in classroom?**

That's a great question and honestly, it's less of a shift and more of a continuation of the same work, just at a different level.

My time at Texas A&M–Corpus Christi, and across my career in classrooms, coalitions, and state systems, has always been grounded in one central idea: what we do should make sense in real classrooms with real children, teachers, and constraints. Research and teaching have shaped how I think very intentionally about connecting theory to practice. I don't see research as something that sits on a shelf; I see it as something that should actively inform how we design environments, support teachers, and build systems that will work.

What that means for TXAEYC is this: a) we have an opportunity to translate what we know from research (developmental science, instructional practices, workforce supports) into tools, professional learning, and systems that educators can actually use. Whether you're a teacher in a classroom, a director managing staffing and compliance, or a coach supporting quality improvement, the question is always, "Does this help me do my job better tomorrow?" That's the lens I bring to this work.

I also come to this role with a deep respect for the complexity of the field. I've sat in many of the same roles as our members...teacher, administrator, higher ed faculty, systems leader, and I understand the competing demands, from ratios and regulations to family needs and workforce challenges. Because of that, my vision is not about adding more to people's plates. It's about building alignment, clarity, and support so that what we ask of professionals is coherent, efficient, and meaningful.

At the end of the day, my goal is to ensure that TXAEYC is not just an advocate, but a partner; one that brings together research, policy, and practice in a way that elevates the profession and supports you in the work you are already doing every day.

**Representation from our organization has become a common occurrence at the Capitol, championing ECE policy. How do you plan to carry that torch and ensure TXAEYC remains the leading voice for our field in Austin?**

Advocacy work is incredibly important, and I have a deep respect for the foundation that has already been built in Austin. My approach is to both carry that forward and strengthen it by being very intentional about how we show up and who we bring with us.

For me, effective advocacy starts with credibility and clarity. We have to be a trusted, consistent voice that policymakers know represents the full early childhood landscape, not just one role or setting. I've worked at the local, state, and systems level, so I understand how policy decisions actually land in classrooms, centers, and programs. My goal is to ensure that when TXAEYC speaks, we are grounded in both research and real-world impact bringing forward not just what should happen, but what is feasible and sustainable across communities.

Equally important is broadening representation. TXAEYC should not be the only voice at the Capitol. We should be the organization that brings the field with us. That means elevating teachers, directors, coaches, higher education partners, and system leaders so policymakers hear directly from those doing the work every day. There is real power in coordinated, collective advocacy, and I want our members to feel both prepared and confident to engage in those conversations.

I also think we have an opportunity to be more proactive, not just responsive. That includes strengthening our relationships with state agencies (like TEA, TWC, ECI), legislators, and partner organizations, while also using data, workforce insights, and member voice to help shape conversations before decisions are made. Advocacy is most effective when it is consistent, informed, and relationship-driven over time.

Ultimately, my commitment is to ensure TXAEYC remains a strong, respected, and steady presence in Austin, and beyond. A voice that not only champions early childhood education, but does so in a way that is strategic, inclusive, and reflective of the full field we serve.

**You were very active with the Florida AEYC before coming to Texas a few years ago. What unique strengths have you noticed in the Texas ECE community, and how do you hope to empower our local chapters?**

That experience in Florida gave me a strong appreciation for how powerful an affiliate can be when it is deeply connected to its membership and aligned across local and state

efforts. Coming to Texas, one of the first things I noticed is the scale, diversity, and sheer strength of this early childhood community. Texas is unique in that it brings together a wide range of settings, systems, and professionals, from childcare, independent public schools, higher education, early intervention, and state agencies, they are all working toward the same goal, even if from different entry points.

What really stands out to me is the commitment. Across this state, I see educators and leaders who are deeply invested in children, in families, and in each other. There is also a strong entrepreneurial and innovative spirit here in Texas. People are building programs, solving problems, and creating solutions in real time. That is a tremendous strength, and it's something we can continue to elevate and connect.

For our local chapters, my goal is to empower rather than prescribe. Chapters should feel like they are the heartbeat of TXAEYC, not an extension of it. That means giving them the tools, communication, and support they need to engage members in ways that are meaningful to their specific communities or interests, while also creating stronger alignment so we are moving forward together as a statewide organization.

I also want to create more intentional pathways for connection across chapters. There is so much knowledge and innovation happening at the local level, and we should be sharing that more consistently while lifting up promising practices, creating leadership pipelines, and ensuring chapters feel both supported and heard. When chapters are strong, engaged, and connected, the entire organization becomes stronger.

At the end of the day, it comes back to membership. If we invest in our chapters, listen to their needs, and create space for their leadership, we strengthen TXAEYC from the ground up.

**As the Editor of *Early Years*, I'm biased! But beyond the journal, what member benefits or resources are you most excited to expand or introduce to our community?**

I LOVE this question, and I'll say upfront, *Early Years* is a tremendous asset. Not every affiliate has a statewide publication, and it gives TXAEYC a unique platform to elevate practitioner voice, research-to-practice connections, and the stories of our field in a very authentic way. I see real opportunity to expand that even further, both in reach and in how it connects to ongoing member engagement.

Beyond the journal, I'm especially excited about building a more consistent and accessible set of member touchpoints throughout the year. When I look across organizations like NAEYC and the AEYC affiliate system, one thing that stands out is the rhythm of engagement including monthly webinars, short "member moments," and opportunities for professionals to connect in real time around specific topics. I would love for TXAEYC to create that same kind of steady, meaningful presence whether that's monthly virtual learning sessions, quick policy or practice updates, or spotlighting members who are doing innovative work across the state.

I also think we have a powerful opportunity to build out mentorship and leadership pathways. Our field spans new teachers, experienced directors, coaches, higher education faculty, and system leaders, and we don't always create intentional spaces for



those groups to learn from one another. Establishing mentorship networks, whether formal or informal, could strengthen the profession while also deepening member connection and value to TXAEYC.

What makes TXAEYC especially unique is our new foray into creating a Shared Services Alliance, which positions us beyond a traditional membership organization and into a model that provides direct, tangible support to programs and leaders in their day-to-day operations. This approach allows us to reduce administrative burden, strengthen business practices, and increase operational efficiency so educators and directors can focus more fully on children and families. At the same time, it creates a meaningful bridge between policy, practice, and sustainability. Thus, ensuring that our advocacy is matched with real infrastructure that supports programs on the ground while strengthening quality across the state.

Ultimately, my goal is to ensure that membership feels like an active, ongoing experience, not something you engage with once or twice a year, but something that consistently adds value, connection, and support to your professional journey.

**Our current issue focuses on acceptance and inclusion—specifically autism and anti-fatness. How do you see TXAEYC’s role in fostering truly inclusive classrooms across the state?**

This is such an important and timely focus, and I appreciate TXAEYC’s leadership in elevating these conversations. For me, fostering truly inclusive classrooms begins with recognizing that inclusion is not a single initiative. It is a mindset, a set of practices, and a system of supports that must be embedded across everything we do.

TXAEYC has a critical role to play in helping the field move from awareness to action. That means ensuring educators have access to practical, evidence-informed strategies that support children with autism, affirm diverse capabilities, and challenge biases, whether related to ability, body, culture, or lived experience. Inclusion has to be reflected not only in curriculum, but in environments, interactions, policies, and how we partner with families.

I also see TXAEYC as a convener in this space. We have the ability to bring together early intervention specialists, teachers, directors, higher education, and policymakers to create shared understanding and aligned approaches. When those systems are connected, inclusionary practices become more consistent and sustainable across settings.

Equally important is how we support educators themselves. Inclusive work requires reflection, learning, and at times, unlearning. Creating safe, professional spaces where educators can engage in these conversations honestly, while being supported with tools and resources is essential to real change.

Ultimately, my vision is for TXAEYC to lead in a way that makes inclusionary practices visible, actionable, and achievable so that every child, in every setting across Texas, is not only welcomed, but fully supported and valued.

## The Power of a Pause: How One Child's Breath Reflects the Impact of Early Childhood Education

By Dr. Rhonda Crabbs, TXAEYC Past President & Dir of Educators at Fractal Education

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During a typical morning in a preschool classroom, children were engaged in center-based learning. The construction learning center was active, with children building, transporting materials, and engaging in parallel and cooperative play. Among them was Riley, a young learner who had been working on developing emotional regulation and social problem-solving skills.

Riley had a pattern of experiencing strong emotional responses, particularly during situations involving navigating peer interactions. When frustration arose, those emotions had, at times, led to physical responses toward other children. In response, the teaching team had been intentional in embedding social-emotional learning strategies into the daily routine. Through consistent modeling, guided practice, and reinforcement, children were introduced to tools such as Conscious Discipline breathing techniques, emotional labeling, and safe ways to respond to conflict.

On this particular day, Riley was engaged in play with a truck, moving it through a structure he had built. Another child reached for the same truck and took it. Situations like this had historically been challenging and often required adult intervention.

However, what followed reflected a meaningful shift.

According to the teacher present, Riley paused and looked at the peer who had taken the truck, then briefly looked toward the teacher. Instead of reacting impulsively, he stood up, placed his hands on his head, and began the Conscious Discipline Balloon breathing technique. He inhaled deeply, expanding his arms outward, and then exhaled slowly, bringing them back down. After completing the breath a few times, he chose to walk to the other side of the construction learning center and engaged with different materials.

Shortly after, Riley approached the director and stated calmly, "I took a deep breath like you taught me."

This moment represents more than a positive behavioral choice; it reflects the development of internal regulation. The child recognized a triggering situation, accessed a learned strategy, and independently applied it without adult prompting. The sequence, pause, breathe, choose, demonstrates the internalization of a skill that had been intentionally taught over time.

In early childhood settings, these outcomes are not accidental. They are the result of consistent, relationship-based teaching practices. Strategies such as breathing exercises are introduced during calm moments, practiced in group settings, and reinforced during real-life situations. Over time, children begin to connect these strategies to their own experiences and apply them when needed.

What is particularly significant in this example is the transfer of learning. Riley did not use the breathing strategy because he was directed to do so; he used it because he

understood its purpose. This distinction highlights a deeper level of learning, one in which children move from compliance to self-regulation.

Additionally, Riley's decision to walk away and re-engage elsewhere reflects emerging problem-solving skills. Rather than attempting to regain control of the truck or escalating the interaction, he demonstrated flexibility and an ability to make a new choice. These are foundational competencies that support long-term success in both academic and social environments.

Moments like this often occur quietly, without disruption, and can easily be overlooked in a busy classroom. However, they represent critical progress. What may appear to be a small moment is, in fact, a significant developmental milestone, one that reflects growth in emotional awareness, impulse control, and independent decision-making.

Early childhood education plays a vital role in fostering these skills. While academic foundations are important, the ability to manage emotions, navigate peer relationships, and respond to challenges is equally essential. These competencies influence how children approach learning, interact with others, and view themselves as capable individuals.

The work of early childhood educators is deeply embedded in these everyday interactions. Through modeling, consistency, and intentionality, educators create environments where children feel safe to practice, make mistakes, and grow. The repetition of strategies, the predictability of routines, and the presence of responsive adults all contribute to a child's ability to internalize new skills.

Riley's statement, "I took a deep breath like you taught me," serves as a direct reflection of this process. It acknowledges the role of the educator while also demonstrating the child's ownership of the skill. This balance, guided support leading to independent use, is at the heart of effective early childhood practice.

For educators, moments like this provide a powerful reminder of why early childhood education matters. Progress is not always measured in immediate or visible outcomes. Often, it is reflected in subtle shifts, in a pause instead of a reaction, in a choice instead of an impulse, in a breath instead of a conflict.

These moments affirm that the time, patience, and intentional teaching invested each day are building a foundation that extends far beyond the classroom. The skills children develop in early childhood settings shape how they communicate, solve problems, build relationships, and navigate the world.

Riley's experience is one example of this impact. It demonstrates that when children are given the tools, support, and opportunities to practice, they are capable of meaningful growth. And sometimes, that growth is captured in a single, simple sentence:

**"I took a deep breath like you taught me."**

## Honoring Uniqueness: Supporting Children with Autism in Inclusive Early Childhood Settings

By Elizabeth Anne Beavers, Ph.D.

Program Director and Associate Professor of Special Education and Studies in Language and Culture, University of Houston Clear Lake

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### Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects children's social communication, interaction, learning, and behavior, shaping how they perceive and engage with the world (American Psychological Association, 2023; Centers for Disease Control, 2025; World Health Organization, 2025). About 1 in 31 children are diagnosed (CDC, 2025), and it occurs across all backgrounds. However, every child with autism is different. Children with autism are considered neurodivergent because their brains develop and function differently from what is “typically” expected. The term *neurodivergent* recognizes autism as a variation in brain wiring and development, not a defect or illness. Embracing the perspective of neurodiversity promotes acceptance and inclusion, helping educators create environments where uniqueness is valued as part of the natural diversity of human brains.

Understanding autism as part of neurodiversity reminds us that differences are not deficits; they are variations that shape how children experience the world. Autism is described as a spectrum because it encompasses a wide range of abilities, behaviors, and support needs. Some children may be highly independent, while others need more assistance or specific adaptations. One child might have strong communication skills but struggle socially; another may speak little yet demonstrate unique strengths and interests. For educators, this means looking beyond diagnoses and designing responsive practices that honor individuality. Pairing what we know about neurodiverse learners with the uniqueness of each child gives us the opportunity to seek understanding and grow our teaching practices alongside them, ensuring every child can thrive in ways that reflect their developmental profile.

### A Teacher's Scenario

Ms. Garcia feels a mix of emotions when she receives the news that a new student, Liam, who has autism, will be joining her preschool class next week. She wonders, “Will I be able to meet Liam’s needs?” She worries about how Liam will interact with his peers and whether her current classroom routines will support him. She fears that she might not have enough training or resources to support Liam effectively and that she might accidentally overwhelm or isolate him if she doesn’t understand his unique needs.

At the same time, Ms. Garcia is curious and eager to learn. She wonders, “What are Liam’s favorite activities?” and “How does he communicate?” She recognizes that every child with autism is different, and she wants to create a welcoming, inclusive environment where Liam can thrive. She considers how she can adjust her teaching strategies and classroom environment to be more inclusive and supportive.

### ***Mindful Tips for the Teacher***

- Ms. Garcia should **take time to learn** about Liam’s interests, strengths, and preferences, ideally through communication with his family.
- Based on what is learned initially, begin by **following Liam’s lead**: observe what captures his attention (e.g., dinosaurs, textures, movement) and then **integrate those interests across the classroom**. For instance, include a dinosaur manipulative in the block area, green paint in the art center, or a dinosaur-themed book in the reading area to create multiple, meaningful entry points to engagement.
- Also dependent on what she learns from his family and potentially his existing therapists, she needs to plan for visual supports, structured routines, and a sensory-friendly space in the classroom.
  - Ms. Garcia should seek (and advocate for) opportunities to collaborate with specialists, such as speech therapists or occupational therapists, who can help tailor strategies for Liam.
- And finally, though easier said than done, Ms. Garcia needs to be patient with herself and with Liam. Meeting and learning about new people is a process of mutual adaptation and growth that unfolds over time as trust is built.

### **Key Practices to Support Children with Autism**

In early childhood classrooms, supporting children’s development requires intentional practices that honor individuality while fostering inclusion. For teachers like Ms. Garcia, welcoming a child with autism can feel both exciting and overwhelming, raising questions about how to adapt routines, support communication, and create a sense of belonging. The good news is that developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) provides a strong foundation for meeting these needs. By focusing on each child’s strengths, interests, and developmental level, educators can design environments and interactions that promote engagement and joy, from the child’s perspective. The following suggestions offer practical, research-informed practices to help teachers create classrooms where every child, including those with autism, can thrive.

#### **1. Create a Welcoming Environment:**

Foster a classroom that is calm, predictable, and supportive. Use visual aids, visual schedules, and sensory tools to help children feel comfortable and secure. Incorporate child preferences into the setting. The reality is that our classroom environments are like our co-teacher. Sometimes, the overstimulation of sound, visuals on the walls, and a mass selection of toys can speak louder to children than our own actual words and guidance. Use opportunities of reflection to see your room from the perspective of a child and ask yourself, what is this telling me? *Run? Put*

*things wherever?* We want our classrooms to be a canvas for learning and engagement with the tools and materials that communicate “you are safe and welcome here.”

## 2. Individualize Support:

Recognize that every child with autism is unique. Tailor activities and support to meet each child's specific needs and strengths. A core DAP principle is honoring each child's uniqueness and creating joyful experiences. In the words of the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) position statement on DAP (2020), *“Educators who engage in developmentally appropriate practice foster young children's joyful learning and maximize the opportunities for each and every child to achieve their full potential”* (p.1).

When working with children with autism, this means intentionally designing environments and learning opportunities that amplify their strengths, whether visual-spatial skills, music, patterns, or focused interests. It also requires adaptable scaffolds (visual schedules, sensory tools, peer supports) to help them access and thrive within the learning experience. Notably, joy must be understood from the child's perspective, which requires educators to be attuned to each child's cues and preferences, recognizing that what feels joyful to an adult may not be joyful for the child. By centering joy, tailoring experiences, and upholding each child's potential, educators make true DAP a reality for every learner.

## 3. Communicate Effectively:

Use clear, simple language and visual supports to enhance understanding. Our language should match the child's level of comprehension. Be patient and give children time to process information. Avoid overwhelming children with excessive verbal input or adding unnecessary layers (such as extra songs or lengthy explanations), as too much information can dilute the core message. Instead, pace communication intentionally, pause between steps, check for understanding, and ensure that what you want to communicate is both received and meaningful for the child.

*As an example*, during a small-group art activity, instead of saying, “Okay, friends, today we're going to paint a picture of a tree, so first grab your brush, then dip it in paint, and then make your tree,” simplify and pace: “First, pick up your brush.” (Pause and check.) “Now dip it in the paint.” (Pause and check.)

## 4. Collaborate with Families:

Work closely with families to understand the child's preferences, routines, and strategies that work at home. Family input is essential for effective support, and their expertise should inform decisions about classroom experiences and opportunities. Communication with families should be **mindful, factual, and partnership-oriented**, especially when challenges arise. Focus on observable behaviors and invite collaboration rather than making assumptions.

*As an example, instead of saying*, “Liam is refusing to cooperate during snack time.” *Try asking*: “I noticed Liam became upset when it was time to sit for snack today. Does this happen at home, and what strategies help him feel comfortable?”

It is equally important to **share progress and celebrate strengths regularly**, not just challenges. Highlighting what the child is doing well fosters trust and reinforces a positive, collaborative relationship. *For example, instead of saying: “Liam had a hard time during story time again.” Try rephrasing: “He really enjoyed the music activity today and smiled when we sang his favorite song.”* This approach emphasizes learning together, respects the family’s perspective, and opens the door for shared problem-solving while maintaining a strengths-based lens.

## **5. Promote Social Interaction:**

Encourage peer interactions and social skills through guided activities, role-playing, and modeling positive behaviors. We must honor that each child has unique preferences and tolerances. Immersing a child in too much socialization or overstimulation can have adverse impacts on the child. Seek to learn the child’s developmental level of play and social engagement. Use what is known to create experiences that are structured, predictable, and interest-based, such as pairing the child with a peer during a favorite activity or using turn-taking games that match their comfort level. Start small, build on success, and recognize that socialization may look different than traditional expectations; for some children, parallel play or brief shared attention can be meaningful steps toward connection. Ensure your expectations are realistic, recognizing progress is gradual, while honoring the child’s developmental stage and preferences.

## **6. Use Visual Supports and Technology:**

Incorporate visual schedules, social stories, and assistive technology to support communication and daily routines. Consistency across environments is essential, so collaborate closely with families when introducing or using these strategies to ensure alignment between home and school. Visual supports should match the child’s developmental level, sometimes this means using concrete objects (e.g., a block and a paintbrush to represent choices) rather than pictures or symbols. Just as our oral language must align with the child’s comprehension, so should the visual supports we provide.

When exploring assistive technology, collaborate with professionals such as speech-language pathologists or occupational therapists to identify appropriate tools. Teachers can also consider low-tech solutions to support engagement, such as offering a wide-grip paintbrush instead of finger paint for a child with sensory sensitivities. Related, technology should be viewed as a supportive tool, not a replacement for developmentally appropriate experiences. While some children may prefer technology, it should never substitute meaningful interactions, hands-on learning, and active engagement with peers and materials. The goal is to enhance, not pacify, child development.

## **7. Foster Independence:**

Support children in developing self-help and independence skills at their own pace. Self-determination, the ability to make choices, act on preferences, and advocate for oneself, is a foundational life skill that begins in early childhood. For neurodiverse children, including those with autism, nurturing independence is

especially important because executive functioning skills (planning, organizing, problem-solving) often require intentional support.

Practical strategies include:

- Embed choice-making: Offer meaningful choices throughout the day (e.g., “Would you like to start with blocks or art?”) to build decision-making and autonomy.
- Break tasks into manageable steps: Use visual sequences for routines like handwashing or snack time to support planning and memory.
- Provide scaffolds, then fade support: Model steps, then gradually reduce assistance as the child gains confidence.
- Honor preferences: As emphasized across all these recommendations, it is important to incorporate the child’s interests into activities to motivate engagement and persistence.
- Celebrate independence: Reinforce small successes to build the child’s confidence and resilience.

These practices not only promote independence but also strengthen executive functioning and empower children to see themselves as capable decision-makers, a skill that will serve them well throughout life.

## **8. Address and Respect Sensory Needs:**

Children with autism often experience atypical responses to sensory input, either hypersensitivity (over-reactivity) or hyposensitivity (under-reactivity) to sights, sounds, touch, movement, taste, or smell. These are often misunderstood behavioral responses to sensory input rather than intentional actions (AOTA, 2020). Recognizing this helps teachers respond with empathy and support rather than viewing behavioral responses as problematic. It is an opportunity to seek to understand the child.

To address sensory needs effectively, collaborate with families and specialists to identify each child’s sensory profile and ensure consistency across environments. For example, if a child is sensitive to noise, create a predictable, low-stimulation zone with soft seating and noise-reducing headphones. Embed sensory breaks and movement opportunities throughout the day, such as offering weighted tools or short movement activities to help children regulate and maintain attention. Adapt materials to reduce discomfort, such as using a wide-grip paintbrush instead of finger paint for a child with tactile sensitivities. Teachers should monitor how these strategies impact engagement and adjust based on observations and input from families and professionals. By thoughtfully addressing sensory needs, teachers help children regulate effectively, remain engaged, and access developmentally appropriate learning experiences.

## **9. Patience and Understanding:**

Addressing moments of dysregulation is often one of the greatest fears for early childhood teachers. Many feel less confident in these situations, which is understandable because emotional regulation is complex and often misunderstood. Patience and understanding apply not only to the child but also to the teacher: building confidence and competence takes time. Teachers can lean on key principles that help the child while reducing their own stress.



When children become dysregulated, they often cannot process language or respond to directions. This means verbal reasoning or overtalking is ineffective and can escalate distress. Instead, prioritize co-regulation as a bridge to self-regulation by focusing on safety and connection first, and remember, safety must be understood from the child's perspective, not the adults. What feels calming to us may not feel calming to the child, so attunement to their cues is essential.

Co-regulation involves staying calm, modeling soothing strategies, and creating a sense of security. Reduce sensory input, lower your voice, and avoid rushing or adding more verbal demands. Sometimes, the most supportive response is simply time and peace in a quiet, low-stimulation space with a trusted adult nearby. Over time, these experiences teach children how to manage emotions and stress.

Key ideas to remember:

- Children may become unresponsive during dysregulation: don't expect compliance or conversation; use calm presence and nonverbal cues.
- Safety and connection come first: your calm tone and predictable response help the child feel secure from *their* perspective.
- Model and narrate emotions: simple phrases like "I see you're frustrated. Let's take a breath together" build emotional awareness.
- Time and space matter: sometimes the best support is quiet proximity without pressure.
- Skill-building is gradual: co-regulation today lays the foundation for self-regulation tomorrow.

#### **10. Continuously grow your knowledge and skills, and use reliable resources:**

Professional growth is not only about gaining new strategies but also about recognizing your own strengths as an early childhood educator and actively reflecting on areas for growth. Seek opportunities that challenge your thinking and expand your skills, and don't hesitate to leverage the expertise of other professionals and reliable resources. Today, there is an abundance of information about autism, some highly valuable, some misleading. That's why the decisions you make must be guided by credible, evidence-based resources. Empower yourself by thinking critically: question, verify, and reflect before adopting any recommendation. Ask: Is this source research-based? Does it align with developmentally appropriate practice? Is it endorsed by trusted organizations or professionals? Reliable resources, such as NAEYC, the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, and professional entities such as the National Professional Development Center on Autism and the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, can guide your practices.

#### **Recent Federal Initiatives and Their Implications for Early Childhood Settings**

Recent federal initiatives are shaping how we support children with autism in early childhood, bringing both new opportunities and new responsibilities to our classrooms. These changes have important implications for how early childhood programs identify, support, and collaborate with families of children with autism.

Federal guidance now emphasizes universal developmental screening at 9, 18, and 30 months, with autism-specific screening at 18 and 24 months (CDC, 2025). This increased emphasis on early screening means that early childhood programs are likely to welcome more children who have been identified at younger ages. This means we need to be ready to support newly diagnosed children and their families during a critical developmental period when early intervention can have the most significant impact.

Federal support is also growing for family-centered early intervention services. This focus on family partnerships reinforces what we've discussed throughout this article – that families are essential partners in supporting their child's development and learning.

Perhaps most encouraging is the growing federal investment in naturalistic developmental behavioral interventions (NDBIs). These interventions merge principles from applied behavioral analysis with developmental science. NDBIs are implemented in natural settings like play and daily routines, involve shared control between child and adult, and use naturally occurring teaching opportunities. These approaches fit naturally with developmentally appropriate practice, emphasizing child-led learning, relationship-focused interactions, and embedding skill development within meaningful, everyday experiences. This federal direction validates what many of us already know – that play-based, child-centered approaches are foundational to quality early learning environments.

Together, these initiatives recognize early childhood teachers as essential partners in a comprehensive system of support, affirming that inclusive, responsive practices in early learning settings are not only developmentally appropriate but also aligned with our nation's commitment to supporting children with autism and their families.

## **Conclusion**

Honoring neurodiversity means seeing differences as strengths and opportunities for growth. When educators pair evidence-based practices with curiosity and collaboration, they create classrooms where individuality is celebrated, and every child's way of learning is recognized as valid and valuable. By embracing uniqueness and adapting practices to meet individual needs, we transform challenges into opportunities for connection and growth, creating inclusive spaces where all children can learn, belong, and thrive.

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## How to Combat Anti-fatness and Promote Size Acceptance in Early Childhood Classrooms

By Flóra Faragó and Sarah C. Savoy

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Anti-fatness is pervasive in K-12 education settings, with detrimental consequences for the health and well-being of fat children (Nutter et al., 2019). Anti-fat attitudes, or the stigma of, prejudice against, and discrimination of fat, including the dislike and disgust of fat people, develop as early as age three and continue throughout childhood and beyond (Baxter et al., 2016; Cramer & Steinwert, 1998; Faragó et al., 2022; Holub et al., 2011; Musher-Eizenman et al., 2004; Puhl & Lessard, 2020; Spiel et al., 2016). Fat children are bullied, harassed, teased, and experience social exclusion (Nutter et al., 2019). Children who experience weight-based teasing or exclusion report higher levels of depressive symptoms, anxiety, loneliness, and diminished self-esteem compared to their peers (Harriger et al., 2010; Puhl & Latner, 2007). A note about terminology is that fat studies and critical weight scholars use the word “fat” to reclaim power and remove stigma associated with the word (e.g., Calogero et al., 2016). Thus, we use the term “fat” in the current paper.

In this paper, we discuss that early childhood educators have an ethical and professional obligation to intervene in and interrupt anti-fatness, and to support young children in doing the same. According to NAEYC's code of conduct, early educators should not engage in practices that are harmful, degrading, disrespectful, and emotionally damaging to children (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2024). Thus, early childhood educators have an ethical and professional obligation to eradicate anti-fatness in all its forms in the classroom (Valauri, 2023). We discuss and provide a list of recommendations for early childhood educators to confront anti-fat attitudes and to promote size acceptance.

Anti-fatness is perpetrated by peers and educators alike, presenting a myriad of opportunities for intervention. Some young children endorse anti-fat attitudes, such as fat is ugly, bad, unhealthy, and that fat people are lazy, overeat, and do not exercise (Baxter et al., 2016; Cramer & Steinwert, 1998; Faragó et al., 2022; Holub et al., 2011; Musher-Eizenman et al., 2004; Puhl & Lessard, 2020; Spiel et al., 2016). Young children

may make fun of fat peers and exclude fat peers from games. Like children, educators also endorse anti-fat attitudes (Doolittle et al., 2016; Kenney et al., 2017; Lessard & Puhl, 2021; Lynagh et al., 2015), however, some educators also recognize the need to intervene in weight-based bullying (Puhl et al., 2016). This presents hope and opportunity for interventions; early childhood educators need professional recommendations, trainings, and resources to counter anti-fatness and to nurture love and respect for children of all body sizes, especially fat children.

Anti-fat attitudes and behaviors in early childhood settings can manifest in various ways, such as educators telling a fat child to not get a second serving of food, while allowing thin children to do so; educators engaging in “diet talk” or “fat talk” about their own bodies, such as “I feel so fat, I don’t like how I look” or “I need to lose weight”; joking that a fat child is “chunky” or a “big eater”; and, using classroom materials that portray fat children in stereotypical ways, such as lazy, messy, and comedic. Other examples include complimenting children or colleagues for being skinny, and emphasizing weight-loss instead of well-being when discussing health and bodies.

Early childhood spaces should be places where the dignity, beauty, and worth of all children are upheld, including that of fat children. Upholding the dignity, beauty, and inherent worth of children in larger bodies is essential for promoting healthy psychological development and equitable educational experiences. Evidence from size-inclusive and weight-neutral school initiatives indicates that environments emphasizing body diversity and respect are associated with reduced peer victimization, more positive teacher–student relationships, and improved classroom climate (Lessard & Puhl, 2021; Russell-Mayhew et al., 2016). Affirming children’s worth, independent of appearance and weight, supports the formation of stable, positive self-concepts and buffers against internalized stigma, disordered eating, and maladaptive coping behaviors (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2018; Pont et al., 2017).

Children’s health is determined by a complex set of environmental and biological factors and thus should not be reduced to a number on a scale. Studies on the relation between health and weight are largely correlational; in other words, causality, such as “obesity causes negative health consequences” cannot be concluded (Calogero et al., 2016). Countering anti-fat attitudes and promoting size acceptance ensures that all children – regardless of body size and weight – receive compassionate, evidence-based care, and are protected from stigma that causes harm.

## **Recommendations**

### **Positive Representation of Fat Bodies and a Range of Body Sizes in Classroom Materials**

Portraying visibly fat bodies in early childhood classroom materials may reduce weight stigma and promote positive psychosocial development. Such representations can foster belonging and help normalize bodily diversity.

- Decorate classrooms with images of diverse body types, including fat bodies.

- People of various sizes and shapes should be represented. Children should notice that every body type is normal and is worthy of respect.
- Use books, videos, and other media that include characters of all shapes and sizes, especially in which fat characters are portrayed in positive, active, and capable roles (not just as “the funny one” or “the villain”). Children need to witness fat characters thriving and enjoying life. Some recommended books include *BIG* (2023), *Beautifully Me* (2021), and *Abigail the Whale* (2016) (Valauri, 2024).
  - Ensure that toys represent a range of body sizes. Children should be reflected in the toys they play with, no matter their size.

### **Create Size-Inclusive, Body Positive Classroom Environments**

Inclusive design research indicates that adaptable furniture and play equipment promote participation and social integration across diverse bodies (Brown et al., 2021). Conversely, school-based BMI screenings and weight-centered initiatives have limited health benefits and raise concerns about stigma and privacy (Ruggieri & Bass, 2015). Early childhood settings should prioritize size-inclusive design and avoid practices that emphasize body weight.

- Ensure that all furniture and play equipment is sized for children of all body sizes so they can all feel comfortable and accepted, and are able to participate in all activities.
- Avoid weighing children, and making body weight a central topic for children.

### **Embed Size-Inclusive Health Education into Early Childhood Education**

Weight-inclusive educational approaches are associated with improved classroom climate and healthier psychological outcomes (Russell-Mayhew et al., 2016; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2018). Developmentally appropriate instruction on body diversity, media literacy, and size acceptance can help young children critically evaluate cultural messages about appearance, health, and weight. Consistent with anti-bias education frameworks (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019), preschool health education should emphasize internal cues, enjoyment of movement, and self-care while avoiding weight-based moralization. Messaging that healthy habits occur across body sizes aligns with pediatric guidance and supports early resilience to stigma.

- Include lessons on size acceptance and fat activism.
- Teach children about the Health at Every Size Movement (HAES).
- Discuss health in terms of feeling good, being active, self-care, and eating a variety of foods.
- Do not link health to body size or weight.
- Focus on health, not weight.
- Discuss that healthy habits come in all sizes. (e.g., “Anyone can be healthy, whether they are thin or fat, small or large”.)
- Create special activities or celebrations that celebrate all bodies.

## **Promote Body-Positive Classroom Culture Through Daily Practices**

Environments that emphasize body functionality, diverse representations, and non-appearance-based praise promote body appreciation and social belonging (Russell-Mayhew et al., 2016). Affirmations that highlight what bodies can do, combined with praise for effort, cooperation, and creativity, reduce the salience of appearance as a marker of value. Framing physical activity as enjoyable, rather than weight-focused, fosters intrinsic motivation and supports sustainable engagement.

- Encourage positive body image with positive affirmations and celebrations of functionality during daily activities such as “Our bodies are incredible and help us move and explore” and “I love my body because it helps me do fun things.”
- Have conversations with children about diverse body sizes and size acceptance, and reassure children that there is not one right way to look. (e.g., “People come in all shapes and sizes, and that’s wonderful”.)
- Emphasize that beauty comes in all sizes. (e.g., “Isn’t it wonderful that friends can be in fat and thin bodies, and all be beautiful at the same time?!”)
- Use non-physical praise, unrelated to children’s appearance, such as praise for kindness, ability, effort, and cooperation.
- Focus on physical activities being fun, not on “making you fit” or “helping you lose weight.”
- Facilitate more holistic views of the body by redirecting children’s attention toward health, skills, and other non-appearance aspects of the body.

## **Lead by Example: Addressing Educator Bias**

Modeling weight-neutral, respectful language to young children is essential. Reflective practices that encourage educators to examine personal assumptions about weight can help reduce the transmission of stigma and promote equitable treatment.

- Avoid negative body talk or “fat talk”: don’t criticize your own body, body weight, or those of others. Avoid “diet talk” (e.g., “I shouldn’t eat this cookie, I am trying to lose a few pounds.”) and labeling foods or eating as “good” or “bad.” (e.g., “This is my cheat day, I can eat bad stuff like chips!”)
- Examine your own biases about weight and how they may impact your assumptions and treatment of children and their families.

## **Counter Anti-Fat Stereotypes**

- Challenge the “fat is bad/unhealthy” and “thin is good/healthy” stereotype. Health comes in all sizes. You can’t look at a person’s weight alone and determine health.
- Debunk the myth that fat is a choice (Gordon, 2023). Weight is determined by genetics and a complex set of biological and social factors.
- Debunk that fat people are lazy, ugly, unhealthy, unfit, and unhappy.

## **Counter Fat-Shaming and Bullying**

Comprehensive school-based approaches are effective in reducing weight-based victimization. Policies that explicitly address weight-related bullying are associated with lower educator bias (Lessard & Puhl, 2021). Both structural protections and developmentally appropriate social–emotional learning interventions are essential for preventing fat-shaming and bullying from early childhood onward, thereby contributing to safer and more inclusive learning environments.

- Treat weight-based teasing as a serious form of bullying.
- Challenge weight-biased statements, discrimination, or ideology directed at children in and out of the classroom.
- Ensure that children feel safe reporting and can easily report fat-shaming and bullying.
- Encourage empathy by discussing how it feels to be judged based on weight. (e.g., “Saying that ‘haha you are so fat and gross’ makes your friend feel very sad; this is never ok to say; how would you feel if someone made fun of you for your body size and looks?” Your friend is beautiful – beauty comes in all sizes.”
- Tell children that insults based on someone’s size, shape, or appearance are harmful and that everyone should be treated with kindness and respect.
- Teach children how to stand up for peers who are teased for their weight.

## **Provide Targeted Support for Fat Children**

For older children, weight-based victimization is associated with long-term emotional distress and academic disengagement (Robinson et al., 2017; Schvey et al., 2016). Supportive relationships with educators and school mental health professionals buffer these effects by fostering belonging and self-worth (Wentzel, 2017). Private check-ins, affirmations, and access to counseling services promote resilience and adaptive coping. Support systems should therefore be integrated into early childhood programs.

- Let fat children know that they are valued, and offer private support and check-ins.
- Provide resources for counseling for fat children who are bullied, or struggle with negative body image.

## **Engage with Families as Partners in Size-Inclusive Education**

Educators should provide families with evidence-based resources on size acceptance and healthy body communication and create opportunities for dialogue through workshops and consultations. Strengthening home–school partnerships promotes consistent, supportive messaging and reduces the intergenerational transmission of weight stigma.

- Share resources with families about anti-fatness, size acceptance, body positivity, and how to talk to children about bodies in a healthy way.
- Invite families to discuss concerns about their child’s body image or issues about body shaming.



## Resources:

### Books

Brown, H. (2015). *Body of truth: How science, history, and culture drive our obsession with weight--and what we can do about it*. Da Capo Lifelong Books.

Gordon, A. (2023). *"You just need to lose weight": And 19 other myths about fat people*. Beacon Press.

Daniels, E. A., Gillen, M. M., & Markey, C. H. (2018). *Body positive: Understanding and improving body image in science and practice*. Cambridge University Press.

### Organizations

Association for Size Diversity and Health: [www.asdah.org](http://www.asdah.org)

National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance: [www.naafa.org](http://www.naafa.org)

The Body Positive: [www.thebodypositive.org](http://www.thebodypositive.org)

UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health: [www.uconnruddcenter.org](http://www.uconnruddcenter.org)

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## Striving for Inclusive Classrooms: Supporting Non- or Minimally Speaking Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Classrooms

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To create inclusive classroom environments, the role of early childhood educators is crucial as they can support all children, including those with disabilities, feel valued and included. However, when early childhood educators hold implicit biases toward children with disabilities, the chances for children with disabilities to be fully included are dire. NAEYC explicitly names this as ableism. Ableism “defines people by their disability and assumes that an individual with a disability requires ‘fixing.’ Unlearning ableism requires educators to see each child who has a disability as whole and worthy of belonging” (NAEYC, 2022, p.21). Many early childhood educators often believe they need specialized intervention skills to support children with disabilities, particularly if their certification or training is not in special education (Bruns & Mogharreban, 2007; Muccio & Kidd, 2018; Nguyen & Hughes, 2012). While acquiring these skills is important, one foundational step is often overlooked: critical self-reflection on one’s perception of what is considered “normal” in children to unlearn ableism. Also, educators need to be mindful of the language they use when referring to students with disabilities. Without reflecting on their underlying beliefs and languages, educators may see children with disabilities through a deficit perspective, focusing on disabilities as something that needs ‘fixing’ rather than recognizing their strengths, potential, and unique ways of engaging with the world. This article provides a framework to guide early childhood educators through this reflective process and offers practical strategies, grounded in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, to support non- or minimally speaking children with disabilities in creating inclusive early childhood classrooms.

### **Why should educators rethink the usage of ‘non-verbal’ to refer to children who are non- or minimally speaking?**

Our society often assumes that being able to talk and hear is the ‘normal’ way to communicate (Chen, 2022), and because of this, students who can easily speak and hear are often given more opportunities or treated as if their way of communicating is better. This can make it harder for children who are non-or minimally speaking to participate and feel included in the classrooms. In a ‘speech-centric, and hearing-privileged world’, students with disabilities are either invisible or seen as lacking even when they have numerous other ways to communicate (Savarese, 2021). Non-or minimally speaking is not the same as non-verbal. The word ‘verbal’ means using words, so referring to non-or minimally speaking children as ‘non-verbal’ ignores the many ways they might use words to communicate with others.

NAEYC (2022) no longer uses the word ‘special needs’ because it reinforces ableism and stigmatizes disability. NAEYC (2022) explains their decision to use the term ‘disability’ instead of ‘special needs’ by emphasizing the power of language: “words are powerful, and language is very deeply ingrained in all of us. The language we use can empower people – or it can expose biases that ‘other’ them” (p.59). It highlights that the words we choose can either reinforce biases or empower individuals. Speaking is one of the linguistic abilities, so when someone does not speak, it does not mean they don’t have any language skills (Bottema-Beutel, Zisk, Zimmerman, & Yu, 2025). They can communicate and understand language in other ways, like through gestures, writing, visuals, or sign language. Therefore, early childhood educators should consider reevaluating the use of the term ‘non-verbal’ when describing a child with disabilities who minimally speaks or does not speak.

### **What Do I See as “Normal” in Children?**

It is important for early childhood educators to critically examine their own beliefs about what is “normal” in children. Educators’ narrow definition of what is normal/abnormal can become a foundation to justify the exclusion of children with disabilities (Watson, 2016). In classrooms, the idea of normalcy often shapes how educators view children’s abilities, behaviors, and ways of learning. But what does “normal” really mean? And who decides what is normal?

The concept of normalcy – what is considered typical or expected behavior, communication, or learning – has been shaped by societal systems that prioritize certain identities and ways of being over others. These systems, rooted in ableism and racism, have historically created standards that marginalize children who do not fit within narrow definitions of normalcy (Annamma et al., 2016).

For example, children are expected to communicate in speaking to learn and participate in classrooms. This expectation assumes that speaking is the “normal” way to engage, which can exclude children who are non-speaking or minimally speaking. Similarly, when teaching practices only reflect cultural norms of monolingual students, children from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds may encounter barriers because their ways of learning, participating, and being may not be perceived as “normal” or “correct.”

To start reflecting on the idea of normalcy, early childhood educators can ask themselves:

- What behaviors or abilities do I expect from children in my classroom?
- What do these expectations tell me about what I consider “normal” behavior or communication?
- Are there unspoken rules or expectations in my classroom that might exclude or disadvantage children with disabilities and/or children from diverse backgrounds?
- How do I support students who communicate in ways other than speaking?

Taking the time to reflect individually or collaboratively with colleagues using these questions can uncover ableism and assumptions that might unconsciously inform teaching practices and perception of children, including children with disabilities.

## **The Impact of Normalcy on Teaching Practices**

When early childhood educators unconsciously hold narrow ideas of normalcy based on ableism, they may focus on what children with disabilities cannot do rather than what they are capable of. Also, ableism “results in discrimination against individuals with disabilities and impacts inclusive practices in the early childhood classroom” (NAEYC, 2022, p.52). For non- or minimally speaking children, this could mean viewing them as “non-verbal” or incompetent, rather than recognizing the myriad ways they express themselves. Such a deficit perspective can unintentionally limit opportunities for these children to fully engage in classroom activities. By reflecting on the concept of normalcy, early childhood educators can rethink taken-for-granted ideas and practices and be more mindful of ways to lay the foundation for creating an inclusive environment where all children, regardless of ability, are supported in meaningful ways.

## **Inclusive Practices for Supporting Non/Minimally Speaking Children**

Once educators have reflected on their beliefs and adopted a strengths-based perspective and language, they can implement practical strategies to support non- or minimally speaking children. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a framework for creating inclusive environments that meet the diverse needs of all learners (CAST, 2024). The Texas Education Agency (TEA) also presents UDL as a guideline for organizing learning experiences for students with and without disabilities. Below are actionable practices aligned with UDL principles.

### **1. Provide Multiple Means of Expression**

Children need various ways to express their knowledge, ideas, and creativity. For non- or minimally speaking children, traditional methods like verbal responses may not be accessible. Consider offering alternative ways for them to share their thoughts, such as:

- Drawing or painting: Encourage children to use art as a means of communication.
- Creating models or structures: Provide materials like blocks, 3D models, clay, or manipulatives so children can construct representations of their ideas.
- Multimedia: Offer children ways to express what they learned through illustration, comics, storyboards, film, music, storytelling, dance/movement, or video.
- Using assistive technology: If available, tools like communication devices or apps can assist children to express themselves.

By offering multiple options, early childhood educators can allow children with disabilities to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities in ways that work best for them. Additionally, educators need to be flexible as children’s timing and speed may vary as they engage in expressing their knowledge and skills.

### **2. Incorporate Multiple Means of Representation**

When teaching, educators can incorporate diversified tools and methods to present content. For example:

- Use visuals, such as pictures, graphs, tables, animations, videos, or physical objects to supplement spoken instructions.
- Pair spoken explanations with gestures, symbols, demonstrations, or modeling.
- Incorporate tactile or hands-on materials to engage children who learn best through physical interaction.

By presenting information in multiple ways, educators can ensure that all children, including non- or minimally speaking children can access and engage with the content and learning.

### **3. Recognize Various Communications to Further Engagement**

One of the most important steps in supporting non- or minimally speaking children is recognizing that they are constantly communicating, even if they are not saying words. Children may use a variety of communication methods to express their needs, thoughts, and emotions, such as:

- Gestures: Pointing, clapping, waving, or other hand movements.
- Eye gaze: Looking in specific directions to indicate interest or preference.
- Body movements: Shifting their body, leaning toward an object, or tapping to draw attention.
- Vocalizations: Sounds, humming, or other vocal expressions that convey excitement, frustration, or curiosity.

As an early childhood educator, it is important to observe these behaviors closely and interpret them as intentional communication. For example, if a child repeatedly looks toward a specific toy, they may be indicating a desire to play with it. Responding to these cues not only affirms the child's ways to communicate but also enhances engagement.

### **The Role of Reflection in Inclusive Practices**

While strategies and tools are invaluable, they can make meaningful changes when paired with ongoing self-reflection. Early childhood educators should continually evaluate their own beliefs, biases, and practices to ensure they are fostering an inclusive environment. Questions to guide this reflection include:

Am I focusing on what children can do rather than what they cannot do?

How am I adapting my teaching to meet the needs of all learners?

What assumptions might I be making about children with disabilities, and how can I challenge those assumptions?

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Supporting non- or minimally speaking children with disabilities in early childhood classrooms begins with a shift in mindset. Early childhood educators are encouraged to critically reflect on their perceptions of normalcy, moving away from deficit-based views and toward a strengths-based approach. By adopting inclusive practices grounded in Universal Design for Learning, educators can create classrooms where all children—

regardless of their communication preferences—are empowered to express themselves, engage with learning, and thrive. Inclusion should not be an end goal, but an ongoing process that requires educators to learn and grow alongside their students with disabilities.

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