

Illinois child care providers need resources to serve children with disabilities

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Jenna Weglarz-Ward, an alumna of the U. of I.'s special education doctoral program, found in a recent study that child care providers in Illinois often lack the staffing, resources and accessible buildings needed to serve young children with disabilities. Credit: University of Nevada

Although the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law nearly

30 years ago, a recent statewide survey of child care providers and early interventionists in Illinois suggests little has changed with regard to promoting the inclusion of infants and children with disabilities in child care settings.

Nearly 70 percent of the more than 991 [child care](#) professionals who completed the online [survey](#) indicated that they struggle or have some difficulties caring for infants and toddlers with [disabilities](#), according to researcher Jenna M. Weglarz-Ward. She conducted that survey and a survey of more than 370 [early intervention](#) professionals while earning a doctorate in special education at the University of Illinois.

Despite the accessibility requirements for public buildings that were imposed by the ADA, people who responded to the surveys reported that a significant number of [child](#) care programs are not designed to accommodate [children](#) with disabilities—buildings are not accessible, rooms may be too small to accommodate wheelchairs, and facilities often lack the special equipment, assistive technologies, furniture and materials these children need.

Likewise, high student-to-caregiver ratios often leave child care providers with little time to address the individual needs of children with disabilities and to collaborate with early intervention providers, Weglarz-Ward said.

About 57 percent of the child care professionals who responded to the survey worked in [child care centers](#), while 27 percent cared for children in family homes and 11 percent worked for the Head Start program.

Among the early intervention providers surveyed were speech and language pathologists and developmental, physical and occupational therapists. More than 80 percent of them reported having delivered services to children with disabilities in child care settings.

The numerous challenges that were reported by child care providers and early interventionists were not surprising, given the many longstanding barriers to inclusion that exist, Weglarz-Ward said.

"Although everyone who responded to the surveys wanted to include children with disabilities in child care, they felt their efforts were suppressed by all these barriers," Weglarz-Ward said. "We still haven't found the proper supports to overcome these barriers. However, many of the respondents offered really good ideas for adapting state-level and program-level policies and procedures to better serve children with disabilities."

Their suggestions included implementing state-level standards that promote high-quality, inclusive child care programs, and developing training requirements for child care providers to ensure they are comfortable with and prepared to care for children who have various types of disabilities, Weglarz-Ward said.

Although the Americans with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 mandates that children with disabilities be provided free and appropriate education services, there currently is little coordination among child care and special education programs, resulting in a fragmented system that families must navigate to obtain services for their children, Weglarz-Ward said.

Few of the surveyed child care providers reported having been included in coordinating early intervention services for children with disabilities who were in their care, even though prior studies indicated that families found it valuable for child care providers to be involved.

According to the study, "child care providers need to be seen as a vital part of the early intervention process. ...Providing them with appropriate training and resources would help them identify children in their care

who may be in need of evaluation or intervention and support families as they navigate the early [intervention](#) process."

"We need to look at child care as being part of the education system so that we're including children with disabilities in similar ways," Weglarz-Ward said. "We need to consider how we can include child care providers in planning these children's education so there's continuity and coordination."

Incorporating some of the mandates of the ADA, such as requiring that child care facilities be accessible, would help create a more comprehensive system that better supports children and their families, Weglarz-Ward said.

More information: Jenna M. Weglarz-Ward et al, Factors That Support and Hinder Including Infants with Disabilities in Child Care, *Early Childhood Education Journal* (2018). [DOI: 10.1007/s10643-018-0900-3](#)

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