

Creating inclusive child-care spaces

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Researchers from the University of Alberta are teaming up with child-care providers and day-home operators to ensure they have adequate training and support needed to offer inclusive spaces for children with disabilities.

Lesley Wiart was the lead author of a new study that identified challenges in providing inclusive spaces for [children](#) with physical disabilities, cognitive impairments and [behavioural issues](#). The research showed that many Alberta child-care centres and day homes support inclusion but sometimes lack training and support.

"Even though providers overwhelmingly have [positive attitudes](#) about inclusion, they still experience some barriers to including kids with disabilities in their programs," said Wiart, an assistant clinical professor in the Faculty of [Rehabilitation Medicine](#).

Wiart surveyed 318 child-care centres and 25 day homes in Alberta for her study, which showed that 91 per cent of centre-based programs had provided inclusive care in the previous two years. The most inclusive programs typically featured more training for staff who knew how to get access to specialized support services, had higher staff-to-children ratios and were physically accessible.

However, the study also showed that 36 per cent of centres and 29 per cent of day homes had turned away children with special needs because programs were at capacity, the child required more attention than staffing levels could accommodate, staff had inadequate training or the space was physically unsuitable.

The survey found that most centres and day homes—60 per cent and 53 per cent, respectively—had used specialized support services for children with special needs; however, more than a third—36 per cent of centres and 40 per cent of day homes—were unaware of how to do so.

Wiart, a pediatric physical therapist who conducted this research as her post-doctoral project in the Faculty of Nursing, says the aim of this research was to identify the issues that can inform policy and service delivery to support inclusion for [children with disabilities](#) in early learning and care settings.

"There is a definite need for targeted training and support for staff at child-care centres around inclusion practices."

Research influences child care

Wiart's research influenced a new pilot program offered by Getting Ready for Inclusion Today (GRIT), which receives funding to support inclusion of children in care settings.

With funding from Alberta Education, the not-for-profit created a program called Access, Supports and Participation (ASaP) that models a continuum of supports and services for inclusion in child-care settings, said executive director Barb Reid. Ensuring programs have flexible funding is one of the keys to ensuring inclusion, she says.

"You can have a really strong, quality child-care centre, but to move it from a quality child-care centre to a quality, inclusive centre takes more intentional provision of resources and supports."

The ASaP pilot is currently being offered at five care centres in Edmonton, including the MacEwan Child Care Centre. Director Joan MacDonald said the pilot will eventually expand to 10 sites, noting Wiart's research provides an opportunity to address the many [challenges](#) of providing inclusive child care.

"An opportunity is there to engage in dialogue and problem-solve with professionals who have expertise and skill in working with children of varying abilities. That's an important interface for us in this project," she said.

Before her enrolment at MacEwan, Christy

Raymond-Seniuk's daughter Sydney struggled with obsessive-compulsive disorder and separation anxiety—issues that were initially recognized with help from qualified staff at the centre, she said.

Raymond-Seniuk said Sydney qualified for funding through GRIT for a part-time aide five days a week, along with consultations from specialists like occupational therapists. Without it, the MacEwan nursing instructor and PhD student likely would have been forced to stay home.

"Once we put supports in place, it was just amazing to see the changes," she said. "My child became part of a group and interacted with the rest of the children, which you always wish for as a parent."

More information: Wiat's research was published this month in the peer-reviewed *International Journal of Inclusive Education*.

Provided by University of Alberta

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