TE IHUWAKA | Education Evaluation Centre

A great start? Education for disabled children in early childhood education: Examples of good practice for leaders and kaiako

ERO looked at how well the education system is supporting disabled children in early childhood education. This guide provides practical advice and real-life examples of good practice for teachers, to support the inclusion and learning success of disabled children in your service.

How does good early childhood education make a difference for disabled children?

Participation in quality ECE impacts education and wellbeing outcomes, and life outcomes later, particularly for children who experience additional challenges. Research shows that the earlier and longer the participation in ECE, the greater the impact.

Disabled children have the same rights as other children to enrol in and receive a quality, inclusive experience in early childhood education (ECE). To thrive, they need to be able to enrol and fully participate in all aspects of early childhood education, and curriculum, teaching, and physical environments need to be adapted to meet their needs. Like all learners, disabled children need to receive quality teaching, in supportive environments, and with strong partnerships with their whānau. Kaiako should work with parents and whānau to understand how to best support disabled children to be fully included in learning and play.

While all children in early childhood education (ECE) need extra help from time to time, some children need more help to be fully included in learning and playing alongside their peers. You might hear the terms "children with additional learning needs", "children with special needs" or "disabled children" to describe this group of children. We've used the term disabled children because it links to the New Zealand Disability Strategy.

How well are disabled learners doing?

Our research found that while many disabled learners enjoy ECE, feel safe and that they belong, a significant proportion are still experiencing exclusion and have poor experiences at ECE.

- A quarter of parents and whānau have been discouraged from enrolling their disabled child at one or more services.
- Almost one in five parents and whānau have been asked to keep their disabled child at home.
- Over a third of kaiako are either not confident or are only somewhat confident about including disabled children in outings.
- We do not know how well disabled children are learning and progressing – over half of parents and whānau said kaiako never or only sometimes discuss their disabled child's next learning steps with them.
- Disabled children with more complex needs have poorer experiences and outcomes.

> "We felt welcomed and like we belonged at [the service]. Information was updated regularly, and we knew what they were learning. We had the feeling the team really wanted to take care of our boys. It was effortless. Made me feel like we could trust them."
>
> **PARENT OF A DISABLED CHILD**

What makes a difference for disabled learners?

Our research identified four key areas for improving education outcomes for disabled learners:

1. **Effective leadership and strong expectations for inclusion**
2. **Quality teaching**
3. Inclusive, accessible environments
4. **Strong, learning-focused partnerships with parents and whānau**

This guide focuses on areas one, two and four.

We also discuss transitions and how parents and kaiako can work together to help disabled children experience a smooth start to school, as we heard this is often a challenging time for children and whānau.

In this guide, we'll briefly summarise what the evidence says about good leader and kaiako practices and provide real examples of these practices in action, from the kaiako and leaders we spoke to. To support you and your team in building up your inclusive teaching practices, we include some reflective questions.

Key area: Effective leadership and strong expectations for inclusion

What's really important?

Informed and committed leadership is essential. Leaders' knowledge and beliefs, along with the culture they promote, have a fundamental influence on how welcomed and valued disabled children and their parents and whānau feel. This flows on to disabled children's education outcomes. Leaders include centre managers, pedagogical leaders and senior teachers/kaiako.

From the evidence base on best practice, we identified the following aspects of leadership as most important.

- Clear expectations
- Planning for and prioritising disabled children's success
- Welcoming culture and values
- Alignment of policies and practices
- Information used to strengthen practice

Te Whāriki sets clear expectations for inclusion for all children, including disabled children. Leaders and kaiako should be deliberate about planning for, and prioritising success for disabled children.

Service leaders and kaiako benefit from using a variety of information to strengthen their practice. Evaluation and *inquiry* support the development of new knowledge and understandings about what works well and what makes the biggest difference for all children.

Effective evaluation involves systematically asking good questions, gathering evidence, and then making sense of the information. It is important that evaluation and inquiry deliberately and specifically includes a focus on how things are going for disabled children.

We'll talk about the evidence and give examples of effective practice that most directly relate to you and your team for these two important areas:

- Welcoming culture and values
- Alignment of policies and practices

We'll then share some reflective questions you can use as prompts when thinking about how well you are providing for disabled children in your service.

Welcoming culture and values

What does the evidence say?

To help disabled children and their whānau feel welcome and that they are valued members of the community it is important leaders explicitly promote a culture that welcomes and values them. Interactions between leaders, kaiako, other staff and disabled children and their whānau should be mana-enhancing.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

There are many ways leaders can promote a welcoming culture, including by being explicit about your service's values when hiring and inducting kaiako. One leader shared with us the importance of hiring staff who align with their commitment to inclusion of disabled children:

> "We would probably start right at interview level, talk about it [the service's philosophy] with Visiting Teachers and with new educators – it is part of our questions in our interviews, 'this is our philosophy, this is what we believe, talk to us about how that fits in with your philosophy and what matters to you'... And then after that, once they've been taken on board it's going through with them and explaining how it works."
>
> **LEADER**

Alignment of policies and practices

What does the evidence say?

There are clear expectations about inclusion for disabled children shared in *Te Whāriki* and other national and international frameworks. To bring these expectations to life, service policies and practices must be aligned with them.

Leaders and kaiako need a shared understanding of the requirements for early learning services, for example, about restraint, transition, and enrolment. It is important that leaders and kaiako are able to explain these, and what it means for them and their practice.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

Leaders of an urban home-based network told us about how they developed policies that are explicit about the inclusion of children with additional learning needs.

They started by reflecting on their own experiences, as some are parents of neurodiverse children. They also involved their learning community to work out what is needed, and how the policy framework can be strengthened over time. This team frequently revisits their policies to ensure they still meet the needs of their children, asking:

> "[...] is this still who we are? Is this still relevant? Is there anything that's changed?"
>
> **LEADER**

One of these policies is a "Statement on meeting the needs of all Tamariki". This document is clear that each service will include children who have additional learning needs and will actively support them to fully participate. It includes statements about:

- appropriate training for educators
- robust information-gathering on individual needs
- ratios that prioritise support for children
- collaboration with outside agencies
- following individualised programmes and plans
- processes for identifying needs in liaison with visiting teachers and experts
- sharing information with parents/whānau.

These clear, explicit statements support all staff to know and understand the importance of inclusive practice. One parent shared the positive impact this focus on inclusion and participation has on her child with additional learning needs.

> "He wouldn't just be included, he'd be the leader; he'd be up there doing it all!"

Reflective questions about effective leadership and strong expectations for inclusion

- How clear are we about our expectations for equity and inclusion, wellbeing, and achievement for disabled children?
- Who is involved in developing the service's philosophy, vision, and annual/strategic plans?
- How clearly do our philosophy, vision, and annual/strategic planning documents set out our expectations for disabled children?
- How well do we promote a culture that welcomes disabled children and their families?
- How do we welcome families of disabled children to our service?
- What monitoring, evaluation or inquiry do we undertake about disabled children?
- How do we use these processes and the information they generate to improve provision for disabled children?
- How do we use child and parent voice in our evaluation and inquiry?

Key area: Quality teaching

What's really important?

Quality, intentional teaching plays a critical role in creating equity in engagement, progress, and achievement for disabled children.

We identified the following elements as important when considering the quality of the curriculum, teaching, and assessment for disabled children.

- Responsive curriculum
- Intentional teaching practice
- Assessment
- Inclusive social and emotional environment

Across all of these aspects kaiako should be careful to ensure that the curriculum is bicultural for all children, and they focus on ensuring they teach and engage with Māori children in culturally responsive ways so they succeed as Māori.

We'll talk about the evidence and give examples of effective practice for each of these. We'll then share some reflective questions you can use as prompts when thinking about how well you are providing for disabled children in your service.

Responsive curriculum

What does the evidence say?

Responsive curriculum design draws on kaiako knowledge of the child and their context. It builds on the child's parents/whānau aspirations, and their strengths, interest and needs. Kaiako may need to adapt learning resources in response to diverse needs. A responsive curriculum is focused on providing equitable outcomes for all learners.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

Leaders of an urban kindergarten told ERO about the impact of high-level capability building, research, and training on teaching practices. Their knowledge-building supports them to be responsive to emerging needs – for example, creating their own resources to support physical strength-building, resilience, and regulation for some children.

> "[When we needed resources] we would make our own here, [like] a tyre and a rope on it so that they can pull it, you know, heavy things that allow them to really – to stop, and to manage themselves. And when they can pull it, add one more tyre [in a] string, pull it further and further... it's [been] good for their self-regulation."

A parent at this kindergarten told us her child with additional learning needs is particularly energetic, and is interested in:

> "anything about using his imagination and his body to do things."

She saw that kaiako continually seek ways to support this.

She also observed them using strategies with her child they had learnt on a PLD course, for example, mentoring him during social interactions. She feels that this is really paying off for her child – his time at kindergarten has clear positive impacts, which he tells her about at home:

> "He loves the kindy teachers, he's started coming home with really positive language. Lots of positivity being fed into him. [It's] been really heart-warming, especially hearing him saying nice things at home."

Intentional teaching practice

What does the evidence say?

It is important for kaiako to have high expectations for disabled children's success. Kaiako should be deliberate about planning for disabled children's learning progress, and communicate this to children and their parents/whānau.

Intentional teaching also includes kaiako planning for the best use of additional resources, like education support workers and early intervention teachers, to optimise learning for all disabled children. It is vital that kaiako challenge practices of segregation (separating disabled children from others) and event- or activity-based exclusion (for example, when going on an excursion).

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

Noah is a young disabled boy attending an education and care service. Strengths of this service include how they develop good relationships with parents, and ensure disabled children are involved in all activities and participate with other children. Noah's learning portfolio and plan reflects his parents' aspirations for him.

One of the goals in his learning plan is about managing his social interactions. Kaiako told us Noah finds it much easier to take turns and share when an egg timer sets the length of each turn – a strategy they successfully introduced with Noah. Prior to using the egg timer, Noah was frustrated when he could not do what he wanted and struggled to share with other children. With the egg timer, Noah is able to let people take turns and is supported to be confident when it is his turn. He can feel in control and understand what is going on.

We observed Noah use the timer to set boundaries in play with other children. When talking to us, Noah was confident and comfortable. He set us a task of building a paper boat within one turn of the egg timer. This strategy allows Noah to be a leader in activities and engage in cooperative play with others.

Assessment

What does the evidence say?

Assessment is an essential part of a feedback loop for planning. Good assessment shows what children have learnt, and kaiako should use this to guide their planning for disabled children's next learning steps. High quality assessment practices enhance children's mana and their learner identities.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

High quality narrative assessments (such as learning stories) link directly to children's individual learning goals and place these in the context of the learning outcomes of *Te Whāriki*. (Effective assessment practice is set out in ERO's quality indicators – see page 22 of *Te Ara Poutama*.)

According to research carried out by Massey University, good practice, particularly for disabled children, includes:

> "Assessment that values the learning potential of the individual and that identifies, in real terms, what the child can do, holds value in terms of reliably supporting further learning outcomes."

This means being clear and explicit about what the story tells us about children's developing capabilities, so that the story can usefully inform next steps in their learning.

During a site visit at an urban kindergarten, ERO sampled learning stories for two of the disabled children attending the service. For each of these children, parent aspirations were clearly documented in their individual learning story portfolios. Narratives were consistently and explicitly linked back to these aspirations – it was clear what kaiako were doing to deliberately promote learning, and each child's progress was clearly evident through rich stories that demonstrated meaningful learning progress.

For example, one aspiration was around developing and extending the child's verbal language capabilities. Learning stories captured the intentional teaching strategies that kaiako used to promote verbal language development, gave explicit evidence of how the child was progressing in response to these strategies, and also identified what they would do next to extend learning. Narratives consistently celebrated and affirmed the child's progress, particularly highlighting where they had positive, increasingly verbal interactions with their peers.

Inclusive social and emotional environment

What does the evidence say?

It is important that the social and emotional environment supports disabled children's wellbeing and learning. Inclusive early childhood services ensure all children can be actively involved in meaningful play and learning with and alongside their peers. Disabled children benefit when kaiako make sure there are frequent opportunities and spaces provided for positive peer relationships to be formed and nurtured.

High quality, inclusive practice involves kaiako creating positive learning conditions and promoting inclusive, collaborative (peer-peer), and independent learning. This might include providing additional supports or removing barriers when required.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

Parents recognise inclusive social and emotional environments as an area ECE services are focused on when it comes to supporting the disabled children who attend. Parents often want this, as they observe this can be highly beneficial to their development.

Some kaiako talked to us about how they deliberately foster peer relationships and reinforce them over time, by:

> "Introducing all of the children to [a child with complex needs]. Inviting children to join in with activities with her; [she] loves dancing, you love dancing too – making those connections, and getting the children involved in activities that children enjoy and [she] enjoys. Children can see that their contributions are valued [...] they are able to see each other as friends."
>
> KAIAKO

Reflective questions about quality teaching

- How do we ensure that plans for disabled children's learning are relevant and meaningful?
- How frequently do we review and update these plans? Who is involved?
- What strategies, approaches and adaptations have been most successful to support disabled children's participation, engagement and learning?
- How do we make sure conditions allow independent learning for disabled children?
- How do we support the emotional wellbeing of disabled children?
- How do we support social inclusion for disabled children?
- What sorts of assessment do we do? What has been most effective?
- How do we document and share disabled children's learning?

Key area: Strong learning-focused partnerships with parents and whānau

What's really important?

Parents and whānau are a child's first and most important teachers and have a vital role to play in helping them learn. Parents and whānau know their child better than anyone – their strengths, interests and needs, the ways they approach new and different things, and how they learn.

We identified the following learner and parent and whānau engagement practices to be most important for disabled children.

→ Educationally-focused engagement

→ Whānau agency

Whānau agency involves parents and whānau contributing to plans and procedures in a service, and providing feedback.

Here, we'll talk about the evidence and give examples of effective practice for educationally-focused engagement with parents and whānau. We'll also share about what makes for good transitions for disabled children. We'll then share some reflective questions you can use as prompts when thinking about how well you are providing for disabled children in your service.

Educationally-focused engagement

What does the evidence say?

Strong learning-focused partnerships between service leaders, kaiako and parents/whānau take work. Service leaders and kaiako should invest time in getting to know their disabled children, parents, and whānau, inviting their input and valuing the knowledge they bring to the service.

It is important that kaiako invite disabled children and their whānau to contribute to, and give feedback on, learning plans. Learning plans will then reflect children's, parents', and whānau contributions, and reflect their identities, languages, and cultures.

When kaiako communicate with whānau regularly, sharing information and progress, and seeking guidance on culturally responsive approaches and whānau aspirations, disabled children are more likely to progress in their learning and growth.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

At an urban kindergarten, kaiako recognise that positive, collaborative partnerships make a difference – and that this means much more than just getting along. After initial relationship-building, positive and friendly conversations are deliberately deepened to include informal discussions about learning, strategies, and plans. Discussions focus on what *really* happens, where everyone can share what is working and how it can be better for the child. Kaiako recognise that families hold rich knowledge that will support their teaching:

> "When we have a meeting with our whānau, we have a proper sit down and say; what do you think, what do you do at home that could work here too? and we swap ideas."

Whānau find this collaborative approach to working together on children's learning plans is a positive experience, even when behaviours are challenging.

Talking about the learning and strategies occurring in both the service and home setting means kaiako and whānau can take a team approach and implement consistent strategies to support the child's learning and wellbeing – to find solutions together.

> "They went over and above what I thought they would do ... the energy, love and positivity ... [I] was thinking this was amazing."
>
> **PARENT**

Zara is a two-year-old girl with a rare genetic disorder that impacts how her brain forms connections – it takes her longer to learn things. At two, she is beginning to pull herself along on furniture, and use a spoon. She attends an urban education and care service.

Kaiako know Zara's family well as her older sibling also attends, and they were eager to support Zara's enrolment. Zara's parents were enthusiastic about the level of support from kaiako, and that they also work with a multidisciplinary team to support Zara. Kaiako liaise with her parents, nanny, developmental therapist, speech-language therapist, physiotherapist, and other specialists to support Zara to:

> "play the best of the hand she's been dealt."
>
> **ZARA'S PARENT**

Specialists help kaiako understand how they can support Zara and her development, and ensure her programmes are consistently implemented.

A key strength of Zara's support team is communication. Prior to her enrolment, her parents were able to talk with them about her developmental differences. From enrolment to settling, Zara's parents and support team talk a lot about her day-to-day engagement, how she is progressing, and how they can support her. Every day during drop-off and pick-up Zara's parents or nanny talk to Zara's kaiako about how she's doing:

> "We keep them informed of what's going on and they keep us informed of how she's going as well, and if there's any concerns or if there's any highlights, you know, all that kind of stuff that comes through."
>
> **ZARA'S PARENT**

Good transitions

What does the evidence say?

Transitions are a crucial time for all learners, but for disabled children they are critical to their engagement and success in learning in new environments. Kaiako need to develop flexible transition plans with parents and whānau, and all the agencies and organisations involved. A good transition plan is responsive to the needs of the individual disabled child and their whānau.

Disabled children benefit when kaiako help make sure accurate and relevant knowledge and information is shared across agencies, early learning services, and specialists to ensure smooth transition from early learning to school for learners, parents, and whānau.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

> "It would be nice to know earlier what to look out for. I have in my mind, like, a sheet of paper that says 'you are here, you're going to here'. What's the process, who is everyone going to talk to? Because it can be quite overwhelming. Because I'm not quite sure – I don't know what the transition to school looks like."
>
> **PARENT**

Reflective questions about strong learning focused partnerships with parents and whānau

- How important are relationships with parents/whānau in our service?
- What strategies and processes do we use to build meaningful reciprocal relationships with whānau?
- How do we support whanau who are struggling/grieving/not coping?
- How do we build our knowledge of and respond to the home cultures, identities, languages and disability diversity of learners?
- How do we engage whānau in educationally focused ILP/learning goals discussions?
- What role do whānau play in developing and reviewing ILP/learning goals and transition plans?
- How do we ensure relevant knowledge of child and whānau is shared during enrolment/transition/referral? How does it inform transition planning?
- What guidance can we give parents and whānau to help them prepare, and prepare their child, for transition?

Useful resources

- The Ministry of Education's guide about early intervention services and how to get support: Early Intervention Services (EIS) – Education in New Zealand
- The Ministry of Education's inclusive practice resource, in the context of *Te Whāriki:* Inclusive practice | Te Whāriki Online (tki.org.nz)
- For some guidance on assessment in ECE: Assessment | Te Whāriki Online (tki.org.nz)
- Resources to support designing your service's local curriculum: Design your local curriculum (tki.org.nz)
- Resources to help you evaluate your own practice: Ngā Ara Whai Hua – a suite of resources for the Early Childhood Education Sector | Education Review Office (ero.govt.nz)
- The Learning Support Action Plan, which sets out how learning support is planned and delivered: About the Learning Support Action Plan – Conversation space (education.govt.nz)
- The website for Whaikaha, Ministry of Disabled People, who are focused on supporting disabled people: Home | Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People
- Details about the rights of people with disabilities:
  - Human Rights Commission (hrc.co.nz)
  - United Nations Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities, Right to Inclusive Education (ohchr.org)
  - UNICEF guide to inclusive education (unicef.org)

We appreciate the work of all those who supported this evaluation, particularly the parents and whānau of disabled children, teachers, and leaders who shared with us. Their experiences and insights are at the heart of what we have learnt. You can find the full report on how good education is for disabled children on ERO's website: www.ero.govt.nz

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