

The [Disability, Equality Specialist Support Agency \(DESSA\)](#) is a national community development organisation whose mission is to support the inclusion and active participation of disabled people in Irish society through community development action. DESSA is funded by the Family Support Agency under the aegis of the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, to provide specific supports to Family Resource Centres and Community Development Projects around inclusion.

In 2006, DESSA secured funding under the Enhancing Disability Services Programme (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform), to develop the Childcare Inclusion Programme, in partnership with Dublin City Childcare Committee and Dublin Inner City Partnership. The central vision of this programme, a social inclusion initiative, is that all children and their families will have access to childcare and play settings of their choice.

DESSA's [Childcare Inclusion Programme \(CIP\)](#) commenced in early 2006 and since that time the Project has:

- Conducted research involving over 120 childcare and play services, to assess the level of inclusion of disabled children in settings and identify barriers, challenges and supports;
- Facilitated a consultation with disabled children and their parents and provided a tailored workshop for parents, to discuss their experiences of inclusion and identify the issues for their children in accessing mainstream childcare and play settings;
- Delivered training courses and seminars in inclusive play and policy development to over 90 childcare, play and early years workers and managers;
- Developed a network to provide a means of communication and support between providers themselves and to link with parents and policy makers, to create a platform for policy development around inclusion;
- Devised a best practice manual, as a practical guide to implementing inclusive policy and practice for childcare and play settings.

Arising from the work of the Childcare Inclusion Programme, DESSA is in a position to make a number of key findings and recommendations in relation to the inclusion of disabled children in childcare and play settings.



Key findings from the Childcare Inclusion Programme

- 21% of childcare and play providers involved in our research said they had previously turned a disabled child away from their service. Accessibility issues, inability to meet children's needs and lack of training were the most frequent reasons cited.
- Childcare and play providers who have received some form of training are three times more likely to include disabled children in their services. The lack of the 'right kind of training' has been identified as a significant issue by childcare and play providers.
- Services linked to an agency which provides them with support are four times more likely to include a disabled child. The quality of this experience varies and some providers report experiencing difficulties in accessing information and advice from external agencies and specialist support staff.
- The three main challenges to inclusion identified by childcare providers are lack of trained staff, 'ensuring you are doing the right thing' and having a suitable space.
- The main supports identified by childcare and play providers, which would assist them to be more inclusive of disabled children are practical training for staff on inclusion, access to information and support and being able to operate from an accessible building.
- No specific model appears to exist for the allocation of resources and provision of support to disabled children, who access mainstream pre-school settings. A variety of approaches are being applied by statutory and voluntary agencies, generally involving the provision of a one-to-one worker.
- Parents of disabled children have identified a need to access information, resources and support from services within their own communities.
- Inclusion of disabled children is not a specific obligation for childcare and play services, under statutory childcare regulations or funding requirements.

Recommendation: The development of a policy framework around inclusion and play in Ireland, which recognises the value and benefits of inclusion to disabled children, their families and the entire community and which supports and promotes the rights of disabled children to attend their local childcare and play settings.

Outcome: Governmental bodies, statutory and voluntary agencies and childcare and play services will actively support inclusive policy, practice and provision.

Recommendation: The development of effective, cohesive partnerships between statutory, voluntary and community organisations, to ensure the creation of a model of good practice in inclusive provision.

Outcome: The input of all relevant stakeholders will influence strategies for resource allocation and the provision of supports.

Recommendation: The delivery of tailored supports to managers and those in supervisory roles, in the form of workshops in inclusive policy development, which incorporate equality legislation and a rights perspective, based on the social model of disability.

Outcome: Knowledge and awareness around disability equality will enhance the capacity of service managers to ensure that inclusion will be supported at every level.

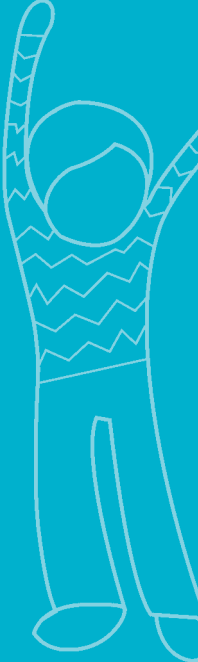
Recommendation: Greater availability of accredited training courses for childcare and play workers, based on the social model of disability, emphasising the individual needs of children and the importance of play.

Outcome: High quality training based on the principles of inclusion will ensure the ongoing development of professional competency around inclusion within the childcare sector.

Recommendation: Increased access to support and information for parents and siblings of disabled children, within their own communities, through existing family support models.

Outcome: The needs of the families of disabled children will be recognised by local services and specific supports will be offered, which will help to address their risk of exclusion and isolation from other families.






Recommendation: The designation of an Inclusion Facilitator, to provide support, resources and information on inclusive practice to childcare and play services, when required, on an area-wide basis.

Outcome: Ongoing support will enhance the core skills of service providers, address their fears and increase their capacity and confidence to include any disabled child.

Recommendation: The building of new childcare and play spaces to be based on the principles of universal design and accessibility for all; existing facilities to receive funding if necessary, to address inaccessibility of their premises.

Outcome: Childcare and play settings will be physically accessible and adaptable to the needs of all children who wish to avail of them.



The overarching recommendation arising from the work of the Childcare Inclusion Programme is that there is a need for a key agency or organisation, to be responsible for the development and implementation of a framework around the inclusion of disabled children in childcare and play settings, in partnership with other key stakeholders.

The function of this agency/organisation would be to actively guide, promote and support the process of inclusion, through the ongoing provision of training, resources and supports to child and family services.

This development would represent a new departure for both the early years' sector and disability service providers and will require the support of a range of agencies.

Childcare Inclusion Programme

DESSA

Fumbally Court

Fumbally Lane

Dublin 8

Phone: 01 4536864

Fax: 01 4536861

email: cip@desa.ie



The Childcare Inclusion Programme is funded by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform through the Enhancing Disability Services Programme, managed by Pobal

