



*Assistive and Instructional Technology
Supporting Learners with Disabilities*

Designing Early Childhood Environments for All Learners

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Designing Early Childhood Environments for All Learners

The purpose of Early Childhood programs is to intentionally design environments to be responsive to all children's needs and to provide opportunities for every child to demonstrate learning and growth in all areas. Given the diverse nature of today's preschool population, care must be taken to select equipment, materials and tools that are useful to a wide range of abilities and interests. Recent trends have looked at universal design for learning (UDL) where the preferences and abilities of all users are considered during the initial design process. This has resulted in products and systems with flexible and adaptable features that are useful to developing children. Items such as seats with reclining backs support developing posture; shopping carts can be used as supportive 'walkers' providing extra stability when needed; communication boards with language prompts for "Show and Tell" activities help young learners ask and answer questions; and 'loop' scissors help developing hand muscles to easily cut paper. When these items are included in early childhood classrooms, educators acknowledge that a 'one size fits all' approach does not 'fit' today's young learners.

When young children at risk for or with disabilities use these universally designed items to participate in activities in ways they can't interact without them, these materials are considered to be their 'assistive technology'. Individual children often respond best to supports used across everyday activities, including ones that are used by many developing young children. It is important that we document the supports best suited to every young learner as they provide valuable information on a child's learning abilities, styles and preferences. These supports can change frequently as a child changes and grows. Identify documentation procedures most helpful to the teaching staff and families in the program so that child is supported across environments.

Universally Designed Environments: Checklists & Tools

In this section, we provide tools to help you consider helpful supports for all children to participate in daily activities. Specific examples of environmental and assistive technology supports are included.



Universal Design for Learning: A Checklist for Early Childhood Environments

Principles of universal design (UD) underscore the need for products and systems designed with flexibility and adaptability in order to provide a degree of customization for all children, regardless of their individual abilities or learning preferences. This checklist suggests efforts to examine the physical, temporal and social aspects of the early childhood environment and to consider built-in practical supports that will enable each child to participate in all daily curricular activities.



UDL/Assistive Technology Checklist for Early Intervention Center-Based Programs

Environments designed for group programs in early intervention include supports to help young children participate in daily activities. This checklist provides examples of supports that are used to support a child's movement, communication, use of materials and participation behavior. Use it to check for classroom items or ones that are similar. There is room to add additional supports that you find.



UDL/Assistive Technology Checklist for Preschool Center-Based Programs

Environments designed for early intervention use include supports to help young children participate in daily activities. This checklist provides examples of supports that are used to support a child's movement, communication, use of materials and participation behavior. Use it to check for classroom items or ones that are similar. There is room to add additional supports that you find.

Group Use of UDL/AT Supports

This customizable checklist provides a 'quick check' on documenting what items are used during group activities in early intervention. It can be customized by support type, class, child, activity or area. This example has identified different support categories customized to the group activities. Users suggest posting it in the room to note when supports are used or to suggest available supports.



Related Resources for designing supportive environments for all young learners:

- Let's Participate! 2016: For home environment supports for young children with disabilities, see [AT Participation Supports](#)
- Vanderbilt University - IRIS Module, 2016: [Early Childhood Environments: Designing Effective Classrooms](#)
- ECTA Center on UDL, 2014: <http://ectacenter.org/topics/atech/udl.asp>

Articles:

- NAEYC Beyond the Journal, 2006: The universal Guide to Early Education: Moving Forward for All Children (Michael Conn-Powers, Alice Frazier Cross, Elizabeth Krider Traub, & Lois Hutter-Pishgahi)
- Ohio 2009: Early Childhood Building Blocks: Universal Design for Learning in Early Childhood Inclusive Classrooms (Julie Bertling, Merrie Darrah, Diana Lyon, & Sarah Jackson)
- NAEYC Teaching Young Children, 2011: Take a look! Visual supports for learning. (Authors Blagojevic, Logue, Bennett-Armistead, Taylor & Neal)

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