



**The Role of Curriculum in Early  
Childhood Special Education**

**Curriculum and the  
IEP**

Chelie Nelson, Ph.D., CCC-SLP  
David P. Lindeman, Ph.D.  
University of Kansas Center on Developmental Disabilities  
Kansas Inservice Training System  
2601 Gabriel, Parsons, Kansas 67357  
620-421-6550 ext. 1618  
<http://kskits.org>

# **What is Access to the General Education Curriculum?**

The IDEA Amendments of 1997 first introduced the concept that students with disabilities are entitled to access, participation and progress within the general education curriculum. IDEA 2004 continued to focus attention on the general education curriculum for all children. One might ask, what does this mean and how can we achieve this for young children with disabilities?

In the early childhood years, the general education curriculum has been defined as natural environments (Part C) and appropriate activities (Part B). Examples would include family routines, social activities, early literacy and math activities, sharing-time, independent play, and listening skills. In essence, the general curriculum for young children includes the activities that children of that chronological age engage in as part of their daily routines, preschool programs, and/or informal activities.

IDEA includes several requirements in the development of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that help explain how educators can ensure that young children are involved in, and make progress in, the general curriculum: 1) IEP goals must be related to involvement and/or progress in the general curriculum; 2) the IEP must specify appropriate supplementary aids and services, accommodations, modifications, or supports needed by the child to have access to, be involved in, or make progress in the general curriculum; 3) the IEP must indicate the manner in which progress toward IEP goals will be measured; and, 4) the IEP must include an explanation if the student will not be provided services in a regular education setting.

The 1997 Amendments concerning access, participation, and progress in the general curriculum have raised expectations for young children with disabilities. Karger and Hitchcock (2003, pg 11) state “access to the general curriculum far exceeds the earlier notion of access to special education services and physical access to the school building, and goes beyond the concepts of mainstreaming and inclusion. At the same time, access by itself does not denote any standards or benchmarks; it represents a first step. Involvement in and progress in the general curriculum help explain how access is to be achieved, and in many instances the IEP is the conduit for ensuring access”.



Karger, J., & Hitchcock, C. (2003). *Access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities: A brief legal interpretation*. Wakefield, MA: National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum. Retrieved March 9, 2007, from [http://www.cast.org/publications/ncac/ncac\\_accesslegal.html](http://www.cast.org/publications/ncac/ncac_accesslegal.html)

# Using Curriculum to Create Meaningful and Measurable Early Childhood Outcomes/Goals

The 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) continues to focus our attention on the general education curriculum for all children. For young children, the general education curriculum has been defined as natural environments (Part C) and appropriate activities (Part B). Examples of such activities would include family routines, social activities, early literacy and math activities, sharing-time, independent play, and listening skills.

Measurable annual outcomes/goals set the direction for instruction in special education, however they are not the general curriculum. While outcomes/goals help families and teachers gauge progress and assure that a steady flow of communication takes place, they are too narrowly focused to be considered curriculum. Rather, the IFSP/IEP describes how a child's disability affects involvement and progress in the general education curriculum, links assessment to curriculum, and describes the degree of match between the child's performance and the expectations of general curriculum standards.

The following information outlines steps early childhood professionals can use to select goals/outcomes that support children's progress and participation in the general curriculum. They were originally presented as part of the KITS technical assistance packet *Creating Meaningful and Measurable IEP Goals and Objectives*. Further information on IFSP/IEP development can be found in the following KITS TA packets ([http://kskits.org/ta/Packets/Tech\\_AssPacketList.shtml](http://kskits.org/ta/Packets/Tech_AssPacketList.shtml))

*Creating Meaningful and Measurable IEP Goals and Objectives*  
*Writing Family-Guided IFSP Outcomes*

## Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) Development

The statement of a child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP) is the cornerstone of the individual education plan (IEP) and an integral part of the Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP). The PLAAFP links IFSP/IEP components to the outcomes/goals selected. The purpose of the PLAAFP is to identify the child's needs and establish a baseline of the child's performance in appropriate activities. The PLAAFP is then used to develop meaningful and measurable outcomes/goals. The PLAAFP statement is a narrative. It should be brief, understandable and accurately describe a child's performance in all areas of education affected by their disability.

The PLAAFP serves as a bridge between the evaluation process and the measurable annual outcomes/goals. The PLAAFP should:

- be stated in terms that are specific, measurable, and objective
- describe current performance, not past performance
- describe the effect of the disability on the child's progress in appropriate activities
- prioritize and identify needs that will be written as outcomes/goals
- identify strengths as they relate to possible interventions
- provide baseline data for each need

Therefore, the PLAAFP spells out how a child's delay affects his/her ability to participate in activities such as singing songs, painting and coloring pictures, working in groups, making and playing with friends, etc. By identifying how a child's delay affects their ability to progress in appropriate activities, the team can identify and prioritize needs from which outcomes/goals can then be created. For example, if Suzie's delay in expressive language is keeping her from making friends (Suzie is unable to verbally initiate, respond to and, maintain social interactions) this need may be identified as a priority.

## Describing child performance

Early childhood professionals may find it difficult to describe a child's performance in appropriate activities because they have not collected enough information during the evaluation process. Many teams spend large amounts of time assessing children using published norm-referenced instruments.

These instruments assess child performance within developmental domains (e.g., cognitive, social/emotional, self-help, motor, and communication) and describe that performance relative to peers of the same age. They help to answer the question “Is there a delay in the child’s development?” While, this is important information and may help establish eligibility; it is only one part of the evaluation process.

The second question to be answered is, “If a delay exists, how is that delay affecting the child’s ability to participate and progress in appropriate activities?” This question should be answered through other methods. To assess how a delay affects a child’s ability to participate in appropriate activities, the team must use methods that assess the child within those activities. The team can use a variety of formal and informal measures, such as published curriculum-based assessments or criterion-referenced tests, structured observations, rating scales, rubrics, portfolio assessments, work sample analysis, language samples, and checklists. Information collected using such methods will provide good baseline data to be used in the PLAAFP.

#### Example PLAAFPs

1. *Katie is an outgoing 4-year old girl who has motor delays. She is above average intellectually and is very verbal. Katie has many friends at home and at school, and is described by her teachers as very motivated to learn new things. Katie enjoys preschool and spends time in all of the learning centers. During classroom activities, Katie is able to hold crayons, markers and other writing utensils in her fist, and makes scribbles on paper. She paints using down strokes only with a paintbrush, as noted in structured observations and work sample analysis. Typically, children of the same age hold writing utensils between their thumb and forefingers and can copy lines, circles and simple figures. They are able to make up and down strokes as well as circular patterns with a paintbrush. Katie’s fine motor abilities keep her from being able to create representational artwork like that of other children her same age.*

2. *Sally enjoys listening to stories individually, with an adult, and is able to maintain her attention from beginning to end of a story. Structured observations conducted during large-group activities (lasting 15 minutes or more) indicate that Sally is able to maintain her attention to the speaker of the group for 2 minutes without physical or verbal support from staff. After the 2-minute time frame, staff must physically redirect Sally back to circle time as Sally frequently tries to leave the group to play with other toys in the classroom. Typically, children of the same age will attend to a group activity for approximately 10 minutes with minimal verbal redirection. Sally’s attention span interferes with her ability to gain new information from group activities such as story-time.*

3. *Joe has many friends, and enjoys participating in group activities. Joe is easy to work with, maintains good eye contact, and follows directions well. During playtime activities, Joe is unable to communicate his wants and needs easily. Joe exhibits the following phonemes substitutions: t/f, d/g, w/l, d/v, w/r, t/ch, t/th, t/sh, d/z, t/s, and vowelization of the “r” controlled vowels as measured by the Arizona Articulation Proficiency Scale (AAPS). Joe has difficulty describing things and events to his peers and adults when those items or events are not immediately present. In these situations Joe is unable to use his strong non-verbal communication to help others understand him.*

#### Measurable Annual Outcomes/Goals

Well-written outcomes/goals are meaningful as well as measurable. Meaningful and measurable outcomes/goals can be easily monitored, and therefore are useful for making educational decisions. An outcome/goal is meaningful when it describes a behavior/skill that will have a real impact on the success of a child in current as well as future environments. Therefore, the team should select outcomes/goals that are not likely to develop without intervention. Outcomes/goals are meaningful when they enhance and address multiple areas in the child’s life, match the child’s developmental level, and are based on the progress a child can reasonably be expected to achieve.

A good way to determine if a goal is meaningful is to apply the “so what” test. In this test, the team asks, “What will the ability to execute the goal do for the child?” The following is an example of the “so what” test:

### Goal

*In 12 months, during personal sharing time at school, Kelly will appropriately respond to the topic and initiations of others (i.e., stay on topic, ask pertinent questions, make related statements) 80% of the time, as measured on 5 consecutive, structured observations.*

### So What?

*So Kelly will be able to gain appropriate information, maintain positive relationships with peers and adults, and function appropriately in group activities.*

*In this example, there are many benefits to Kelly in accomplishing the goal. The answers to the “so what” test is useful for Kelly, and therefore the goal is meaningful. Had the team been unable to provide a good answer to the “so what” test, then the goal would not be functional and another goal should be selected.*

The second test used by the team to identify the appropriateness of a goal is the “stranger test”. Outcomes/goals should be written so that anyone who is working with the child, including the parents, can use the information to develop appropriate intervention plans as well as assess the child’s progress.

To write measurable outcomes/goals start with the baseline data provided in the PLAAFP. What do you know about what the child can do? In the first PLAAFP example, we know that Katie is able to hold crayons, markers and other writing utensils in her fist, and make scribbles on paper. She paints using down strokes only with a paintbrush. Given the baseline information we also know that a typically developing child of the same age holds the same types of utensils between the thumb and forefingers. These are all observable behaviors and can therefore be measured. We also know from the PLAAFP that Katie’s inability to hold the writing utensils between her thumb and forefingers is keeping her from being able to create representational artwork like that of other children her same age. We could hypothesize that without intervention, Katie will improve in her ability to draw because she doesn’t avoid these types of activities in school, and has the cognitive skills necessary for this skill. However, we also know that Katie’s peers will be improving at a much faster rate. Without intervention, the gap between Katie’s skills and her peers will continue to get larger. Given this information we could write a measurable goal as follows:

*In 12 months, when provided with writing utensils (crayons, markers, pencils) Katie will create representational artwork while holding writing utensils between her thumb and forefingers on 4 out of 5 consecutive opportunities.*

### References

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The next four pages are a section in another technical assistance packet developed by KITS, *Developmentally Appropriate Practices*, which can be downloaded at <http://kskits.org/html/ta/tapackets.html>. In addition, information on designing individually appropriate interventions can be found in another packet, *What do You do When You Get There? Providing Itinerant Services in Inclusive Settings* available from the same website address.

## Individually Appropriate Practice

### Krista

Krista will turn five years old in January, making her the oldest child in your four-year old group. Krista's play, language, and motor development are, however, typical of a child two years younger. She communicates only in short sentences, has difficulty manipulating small objects, and has a limited attention span.

Krista enjoys working with manipulatives, but she is better at taking apart the buildings of others than building her own. She also has difficulty joining children in the dramatic play area, since she can't get involved at the same level of fantasy play as her peers. When the other children do let her join, she is often asked to be the baby sister and ride in the carriage even if she really wants to be a fire fighter. Krista is often found in the art area where she works alone, making random lines across piece after piece of paper.

### Classroom Activity

You are designing an activity for the dramatic play area called "Pretend Store". The area has been arranged to look like a store with aisles, cash register and other props. In this area, the children will be encouraged to remember and act out typical "going to the store" activities. For example, they may be asked to "plan for the trip to the store" by making a list ahead of time; they may use real money or create play money to use to buy the goods. They may also choose to pretend to be a store clerk or cashier. General learning outcomes related to this activity include: Taking on pretend roles in play; the importance of planning in every day life; money exchanged for goods and services; and prewriting skills.

Your challenge is to plan and facilitate activities that are individually appropriate for Krista, within this developmentally appropriate activity.

### Adapting to Meet Individual Needs

When adapting lessons or activities, it is important to start first with what the child can do. Creating appropriate activities requires educators to build upon the strengths of individual children. In relation to the store activity, list what you know Krista can do in each domain area (i.e. language, communication, motor, cognition). To illustrate this process we have identified one fine motor skill.

	Krista Can Do	Next Step	Adapt/Modify	Staff
<i>Example</i>	Take things apart			

The next step is to determine what you would like Krista to learn. Looking at Krista's "can do list" write down what you believe to be the next higher skill. In the example above, we noted that Krista can take things apart. We also know that Krista likes to take apart buildings of others, rather than her own, which may causing some problems. Therefore, the next skill level for Krista in the area of "taking apart" might look something like this:

*Example*

Krista Can Do	Next Step	Adapt/Modify	Staff
Take things apart	Take things apart upon request of a teacher or peer.		

You have identified specific goals and objectives which are individually appropriate for Krista. Now identify specific resources, instructional strategies and/or modifications to the environment that must be put in place to help Krista be successful.

*Example*

Krista Can Do	Next Step	Adapt/Modify	Staff
Take things apart	Take things apart upon request of a teacher or peer.	Pre-teach Krista to take the groceries out of the shopping cart and put them into a bag so she will have a clearly identified role during the play session.	

Once strategies, modifications and materials have been identified, make a list of the staff person(s) responsible for these activities as well as how or where special instruction might take place.

*Example*

Krista Can Do	Next Step	Adapt/Modify	Staff
Take things apart	Take things apart upon request of a teacher or peer.	Pre-teach Krista to take the groceries out of the shopping cart and put them into a bag so she will have a clearly identified role during the play session.	ECSE T-Direct Instruction SPL-In conjunction with speech lesson

Developmentally appropriate practice suggests that activities are age appropriate and individually appropriate. Such activities build upon what children know and can do. When adapting lessons or activities to meet the needs of individual children we must build upon individual strengths. The key is planning ahead and planning for individual success.

Goosen, M., & Lindeman, D. P. (1996). *Developmentally appropriate practices*. Parsons, KS: Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities.

## Adapting Lesson Plans

Lesson/Activity: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Learning Outcomes	Materials Needed	
<b>Student:</b>		
Can do	Next Step	Adapt/Modify Staff



## Adapting Lesson Plans

<p><b>Lesson/Activity:</b> Pretend Store. House area set up like a store with aisles, cash register and _____ <b>Date</b> _____</p> <p>other props. Children are encouraged to "plan for the trip to the store" by making a list ahead of time. General learning outcomes related to this activity include: Taking on pretend roles in play; the importance of planning in every day life; money exchanged for goods and services; prewriting skills.</p>			
Learning Outcomes	Materials Needed		
<p>New roles in play w/peers Maintain attention in play w/ peers</p>	<p>Paper/pencils for lists Cash register/real or play money Shopping carts Food boxes/play food Wallet/purse</p>		
<p><b>Student:</b> Krista is 4 years old. Language, play and motor skills in the 2 year range. Likes manipulatives, fine motor activities (i.e. tear down blocks, paint with brush). Parallel play stage.</p>			
Can do	Next Step	Adapt/Modify	Staff
<p>Parallel play - along side w/peer</p>	<p>Using props in play w/peers Sustained attention in play w/peers</p>	<p>Pre-teach a role to Krista including props (e.g. cashier, store clerk)  Reinforce peers for interaction w/Krista</p>	<p>Teacher  Aide</p>
<p>Wants to play in group/take on role</p>	<p>Communicating wishes to peers regarding role play</p>	<p>Extend Krista's communication during play (i.e. "You are taking the money Krista")</p>	<p>SPED Teacher</p>
<p>Fine motor skills: take apart blocks paint lines with brush</p>	<p>Take apart during appropriate times</p>	<p>Pre-teach activities "taking out" that facilitate role play (e.g. taking objects out of the cart)</p>	<p>Aide/ Peer</p>

Goosen, M., & Lindeman, D. P. (1996). *Developmentally appropriate practices*. Parsons, KS: Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities.



**Questions for Reflection:**  
**Curriculum and Young Children with Disabilities**

*These questions can be used for personal study and/or as questions to guide study group discussions.*

1. What is the general curriculum for young children (birth – 5 years)?
2. Describe the relationship between the IFSP/IEP and the general curriculum?
3. What purpose do the Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) serve?
4. Describe the relationship between the early childhood assessment and IFSP/IEP development?
5. How would you describe the difference between intervention and curriculum?
6. What types of curriculum modifications, adaptations and interventions support the learning of young children with disabilities within the general curriculum?
7. How can home-based programs utilize the general curriculum?
8. How can itinerant programs utilize the general curriculum?
9. How can center-based programs utilize the general curriculum?
10. What are some important considerations when making curricular choices?