GROWING IDEAS

Increase Access: Universal Design in Early Care & Education

What is Universal Design?

According to Ron Mace of the Center for Universal Design, universal design is the philosophy of designing and creating products and environments to be accessible to the greatest extent possible, to the people who use them, without the need for adaptation.

What does Universal Design have to do with early care and education?

The concept of Universal Design has been broadened beyond the creation of physical space and materials, to include the design of curriculum, teaching strategies, and assessment. Universal Design for Learning[*] (UDL) focuses on planning from the start, for the widest diversity of learners.

How can UDL help my program?

By planning for the broadest range of learners, educators spend less time modifying or adapting later. Using a UDL approach encourages creativity because at the core of UDL is flexibility and resourcefulness in designing all program components.

Consider the following questions in planning for successful experiences for all children:

Who are the children?
- What is known about each child's developmental stage and learning style?
- What is known about the group's range of abilities (vision, hearing, communicating, moving, attending, interacting, and comprehending English)?

What is the physical environment? Can all children:
- Get in and out of the building?
- Enter learning centers?
- Help themselves to toys and materials?
- Use materials independently and appropriately?
- See their family and culture reflected in the classroom decorations, books and materials?

[*]A new paradigm for teaching, learning, assessment, and curriculum development researched and developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), Wakefield, MA. http://www.cast.org/

What are the curriculum and teaching strategies? Do they:

- Reflect learning goals for individual children, as well as the group?
- Provide activities that are challenging, but achievable?
- Offer flexible materials and a variety of developmentally appropriate choices?
- Include varied approaches to presenting and supporting learning (verbal, auditory, physical, visual)?
- Support each child's interests?
- Respect family religious, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity?

What are the assessment practices? Are there ongoing opportunities:

- For children to show what they know and can do in a variety of ways?
- To evaluate children's learning and adjust curriculum?

How to begin:

- Assess your current setting and program practices using the questions listed above to identify your program strengths and areas of need.
- Review the resource material listed below to learn more about the topic.

Consider how a unit on insects can be enhanced by UDL:

- **Environment:** Books about bugs might include picture books, board books, big books, lift-the-flap books, interactive books, digitized books.

Providing a variety of flexible educational materials allows the greatest number of children to be involved in learning.
One example of a flexible tool is the computer. Choices include:

- Raising or lowering the volume, or using headphones to meet hearing needs or to reduce distractions.
- Adjusting screens for low- or high-contrast; larger font to meet visual needs.
- Adjusting computer keys or switches to differing levels of physical ability.
- Providing software programs with text-to-speech options to support auditory learners by reading children's writing aloud or allowing children to record their own voices.
- Providing software that is open-ended, or with options for use at varying levels of difficulty, to support children with differing abilities.

- **Curriculum and Teaching Strategies:** Activities might include listening to a visiting expert, watching video clips, playing with toy bugs, moving like a caterpillar to a bug song, or using a magnifying glass for hands-on study of collected bugs.
- **Assessment:** Observe children's choices to understand their preferences. Provide ways for children to represent their ideas and theories about bugs. Collect samples of their work. Document their understanding of the topic for their portfolio and to determine if learning goals have been achieved.

Where to learn more:

"Universal Design for Learning: From the Start" (2002). Retrieved September 22, 2006, from
http://www.ccids.umaine.edu/facts/facts6/udl.htm

"Creating Inclusive Child Care Facilities: A Guide for Child Care Professionals" (2003) Retrieved September 26, 2006, from http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/pubs_p/pchildcare.htm

"What is Universal Design for Learning?" (April 2003). Retrieved September 24, 2007, from http://www.cast.org/research/udl/index.html

Maine's Network of Child Care
Resource Development Centers