

# Developmentally appropriate environments for children with special needs

With increasing emphasis on inclusive settings, concern has heightened regarding the developmental appropriateness of the learning environments for young children with special needs in group care situations. Developmental practices used in early childhood education have produced distinctly different approaches toward teaching and learning from the behavioral approaches traditionally used in early childhood special education. Based on research of how children learn most effectively, both from the early childhood literature and from special education studies, strategies are presented for adapting environments to meet the capabilities and needs of young children. Dimensions discussed include ratios and group size, structure, curriculum, integration of special therapies, interest areas, environmental assessment, role of the family, multicultural adaptations, transitions, promotion of social interactions, health and safety, outdoor environments, and personnel standards and competencies.

*Mimi A. Graham, EdD*  
*Associate Professor of Research*  
*Center for Prevention and Early Intervention*  
*Policy*  
*Florida State University*  
*Tallahassee, Florida*

*Donna M. Bryant, PhD*  
*Director of Family and Child Care Research*  
*Program*  
*Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center*  
*University of North Carolina*  
*Chapel Hill, North Carolina*

**D**OES THE BEST KIND of education and child care environment for fostering growth and development for children with special needs differ from that for children with typical needs? Practices used in early childhood education often vary from those used in early childhood special education. Theoretically, early childhood practices tend to reflect the developmental principles of Piaget, Erikson, and Montessori; early childhood special education is grounded in the behavioral constructs of Skinner, Pavlov, and Watson. While similar themes are common to both orientations (eg, independence, adaptation, contingent responsiveness, social competence, individualization),<sup>1</sup> developmental and behavioral ideologies have often been translated into distinctly diverse approaches toward teaching and learning for the child with special needs. For example, environments for children with disabilities are typically less stimulating and developmentally appropriate than those for their nondisabled peers.<sup>2</sup> Behavioral instruction methods such as reinforcement, model-

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