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Focusing on individuals with autism, intellectual disability, and related disabilities



Legal Brief

New Interdisciplinary Certification Strengthens Teacher Effectiveness for Supporting Young Children with Autism and Developmental Delays



Cathy L. Galyon
East Tennessee State University

The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) published a joint position statement emphasizing the necessity for educators to be trained in supporting inclusion. They highlighted that practitioners should receive education and training on evidence-based practices (EBPs) to promote effective, inclusive education opportunities for children who receive special education services, particularly those with low-incidence disabilities (DEC/NAEYC, 2009).

While inclusive practices have become more prevalent in schools, general education teachers report feeling underprepared or lacking confidence when it comes to effectively supporting the social/emotional, behavioral, and learning needs of young students with extensive support needs. This sentiment is often due to limited experience (Killoran & Zaretsky, 2014). According to Mader (2017), many teacher preparation programs do not provide adequate training in working with children who have behavioral challenges, autism, and developmental delays. Thus, general educators may enter the classroom without adequate training and preparation to teach children with disabilities.

A Policy to Enhance Teacher Preparedness

To address these gaps, a handful of states have begun implementing interdisciplinary early childhood certification

programs that integrate both general and special education. For example, the Tennessee Board of Education (TBOE) approved Policy 5.502, merging PreK–3 Early Childhood and PreK–3 Early Childhood Special Education teacher certifications into a single Interdisciplinary PreK–3 teacher certification (IPreK3; Tennessee State Board of Education, 2024). This policy mandates that institutions of higher education (IHEs) design programs incorporating DEC, NAEYC, technology, and state literacy standards. Notably, all courses must encompass both general and special education content, ensuring special education is embedded throughout coursework, rather than taught in isolation. Although Tennessee's model is one example, similar initiatives have been proposed or implemented in other states to address the national shortage of early childhood special education teachers.

Implications for Teacher Preparation Programs

States implementing interdisciplinary certification programs require IHEs to revise existing coursework to integrate both general and special education disciplines, as well as state literacy standards. A key component of these interdisciplinary programs is instruction on working with young students with extensive support needs. Some universities have adopted co-

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teaching models, where early childhood and special education instructors teach courses collaboratively. This approach allows faculty to provide instruction while modeling inclusive teaching practices; thus enabling preservice teachers to observe and practice co-teaching strategies. Access to innovative, practice-based teacher preparation supports PreK–3rd grade teachers in effectively supporting students with a wide range of developmental needs in inclusive settings.

Benefits of Inclusive Early Childhood Settings

Inclusive early childhood education programs have demonstrated substantial benefits for all children. For instance, researchers highlight that when young children with significant disabilities are educated in inclusive settings, developmental and learning gains are often observed (US Department of Health and Human Services and US Department of Education Joint Statement, 2023). Additionally, inclusive PreK programs provide natural settings for children with autism to learn social and academic skills needed in future classroom settings (Second Wave Media, 2024). The US Department of Health and Human Services and the US Department of Education released a joint statement stating, “High-quality inclusion that begins early and continues into school likely produces the strongest outcomes (2023, p. 7). According to this report, students with disabilities who spend greater time in inclusive settings, tend to demonstrate higher academic achievement and cognitive gains and are likely to have a greater probability of employment and higher wages later in life (Nahmias et al., 2014; US Department of Health and Human Services and US Department of Education Joint Statement, 2023). Additionally, exposure to typically developing peers for students with autism can lead to other benefits such as improved social, communication, and imitation skills (e.g., Nahmias et al., 2014).

National Implications and Future Directions

While Tennessee’s interdisciplinary certification is an emerging model, fewer than ten states currently offer similar pathways for early childhood educators. Expanding these programs at a national level could help address the critical shortage of early childhood special education teachers. Teachers with interdisciplinary training are better equipped to create developmentally appropriate, robust, and inclusive environments where all children can learn, regardless of their level of support needs.

Inclusive classroom placements for young children with extensive support needs typically have a lasting impact. Students with autism and developmental delays who are educated in inclusive settings exhibit gains in social skills, greater peer acceptance, and access to developmentally appropriate, grade-level curricula. Legislation promoting such interdisciplinary certifications could benefit all students, resulting in a better-prepared teaching workforce for the nation’s youngest learners.

Increasing federal and state investment in teacher preparation programs that emphasize inclusion could have lasting benefits for the early childhood workforce. This investment can come in the form of grants and other financial supports to obtain Inclusive PreK–3 certification, alternative pathways to certification, and extensive mentoring and support for new teachers. Policymakers at the state and national levels should consider integrating interdisciplinary certification models into national teacher licensure discussions to better prepare educators for the diverse needs of PreK–3 students.

In sum, interdisciplinary certification programs present a promising approach to improve the quality of teacher preparation for supporting young children with extensive support needs in inclusive classroom settings. Expanding interdisciplinary early childhood certification in more states would plausibly enhance the quality of early childhood education. Consequently, the learning, social/emotional, and behavioral outcomes for all children, particularly those with autism and developmental disabilities, would be optimized. ■

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President's Message: A Year in Review

Bree Jimenez



I am truly honored to serve as your president for this year, and I look forward to working alongside such an incredible group of professionals who are dedicated to supporting individuals with autism and developmental disabilities. While we are currently navigating a time of uncertainty in our nation, I remain optimistic that together we can continue to make our voices heard and advocate for the vital services that our students and families deserve.

As we all know, federal support for students with disabilities is critical for ensuring that the educational needs of these students are met, but the future is unclear. Despite these challenges, I believe in the power of our collective efforts. As educators, researchers, and advocates, we are in a unique position to effect positive change. Our continued engagement and advocacy will make a difference, and together, we can ensure that special education services remain a priority.

Reflecting on our recent successes, I am thrilled to share that the DADD conference in January, held in Clearwater Beach, Florida, was an overwhelming success. With 647 registered attendees, we gathered for an event full of amazing presentations, community building, and valuable insights. It was truly inspiring to witness the dedication and passion of everyone in attendance. I want to extend a heartfelt thank you to all the

conference committee members, speakers, presenters, and attendees who made this event so impactful.

Looking ahead, I am excited to announce that our next DADD conference will be held in Long Beach, California, in January 2026. This will be an excellent opportunity for us to continue our work in fostering a strong community of professionals, to promote research and evidence-based practice, and to exchange ideas. I cannot wait to see many of you there, and I'm confident that it will be another unforgettable experience for our entire community.

As your new president, my focus for this year will be to build a robust community of engaged members, strengthen the connections between educational professionals, and continue in the work to establish CEC-DADD as a premier resource for our field. Our division will continue to encourage professional growth, support research initiatives, and facilitate the dissemination of key research findings that will drive positive change for our students.

Thank you for entrusting me with this role. I look forward to an exciting year ahead, and I am confident that, together, we will continue to make a profound impact on the lives of students with autism and developmental disabilities. We are stronger together—please reach out to our committee chairs if you would like to get more involved! ■

Bree Jimenez
DADD President

Executive Director's Corner

Jordan Shurr, PhD



As I was headed to my office last week, I ran across a flyer about an upcoming seminar for pre-service teachers. The title read *How to Deal with Challenging Parents*, and the flyer continued to give some key discussion points as well as the date and time of the event. Admittedly, I got stuck on the title and reread it a few times to make sure I saw it correctly. As an academic and former teacher, I am acutely aware of the faculty obsession with verbiage (see what I did there, I could have just said words); and I am of two beliefs on this. On one hand, I am constantly prone to getting my own words mixed up and I often use shorthand to quickly share my thoughts. This is especially true after too much coffee or when I am talking to someone I know well. On the other hand, I know that words and phrasing matter and are often a reflection of my thoughts, or lack thereof, on a topic. So, this was my lens as I walked away with the title rattling in

my head. Challenging parents...how to deal with...Our future teachers were being invited to learn strategies for managing the troublemaker parents of their students. I'll be honest, I do get the sentiment. Healthy parent and school communication and trusting relationships are important and can be critical to student success. When those links are strained, teaching can get more difficult.

There was something with the framing, however, that did not and does not sit right. It was presented as if challenging parents were a given and that teachers needed to both anticipate and somehow learn to confront the coming rage that was inevitable. Beyond being frightening for a crowd of very soon to be teachers, I think it is incorrect. Yes, as a teacher it can sometimes be a challenge to find common ground with a parent of your student. But that does not make the parent themselves a challenge to be managed. I would argue that, as an occasional "challenging parent" myself, it's quite natural to get upset or angry if your child is consistently teased on the bus, if the school does not consult you on an important educational decision, or

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if most or all of the feedback sent home describes the bad decisions your kid made at school. These are some of the challenges that a parent might face from time to time, or even year after year. Taking time to listen, understand, and acknowledge these challenges and the related variables can be a start toward building a positive and respectful home and school relationship. This is not management; this is partnership and relationship building.

So, back to the flyer. I get the idea of a flashy slogan to grab attention to fill seats; in my case, it worked...kind of. However, the messages we share about education and the role of the teacher have the power to be helpful or harmful. In this case, implying that parents are a problem in education, and that teachers must learn a form of social self-defense is certainly not helpful. I'd probably change the title to something like *How to Build Healthy School-Home Relationships*. And yes, I agree, this is not the most eye-catching title. But if the goal is to get people there, I might suggest adding a fun picture of a dachshund wearing a top hat or promise to provide cookies... maybe both.

Are you interested in exploring more about positive collaborations with families? DADD has got you covered!

Advocacy and Engagement in Special Education Policy

Luann L. Ley Davis, PhD



My name is Luann Ley Davis, and I am honored to serve as your new DADD Children and Youth Action Network (CAN) coordinator. In this role, I will be sharing valuable information, resources, and advocacy opportunities with you. It was a pleasure meeting many of you at the Policy & Legislation Town Hall during the recent conference in January. I look forward to continuing these important discussions and plan to host additional sessions via Zoom in the near future.

As a collective, we remain deeply concerned about policies affecting special education. I have engaged in conversations with experts in Policy and Legislation regarding the potential dismantling of the U.S. Department of Education and its implications. Such a change could significantly impact the oversight of special education, the continuation of Head Start services, Title I funding for underserved schools, and higher education grants that support the preparation of special education teachers, faculty, and research on best practices. Direct advocacy is an important activity, including writing personal letters to legislators and following up with phone calls to their staff to ensure our concerns remain a priority.

- Check out our online webinars (with several focused on family relationships): <https://daddcec.com/dadd-webinars>.

- Read our journal, *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities* (ETADD). Here is an article you may find interesting:

Montoya, C., Gilson, C., & Yllades, V. (2022). Experiences of Latinx immigrant parents of children with developmental disabilities in the IEP process. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, 57(4), 404–416.

- Take a look at our books. Here's one we would like to share:

Harkins Monaco, E. A., Fuller, M., & Stansberry Brusnahan, L. L. (2021). *Diversity, autism and developmental disabilities: Guidance for the culturally responsive educator*. Prism Series, Vol. 13. Council for Exceptional Children.

- If you are able attend, we'd love for you to join us at our 2026 conference.

- And finally, join a committee and/or reach out: <https://daddcec.com/about-dadd>. ■

With many years of experience in advocacy, I have witnessed firsthand the power of direct engagement with policy-makers. As members of DADD, our collective voice is critical in shaping the future of special education. Pioneers like Drs. Collins and West began their careers before the establishment of federal special education laws and the U.S. Department of Education. Their tireless efforts, along with those of countless others, have built the foundation upon which we stand today. It is imperative that we continue their legacy and safeguard these essential advancements.

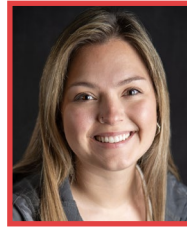
Now is the time to act! I have included a link to my **PowerPoint presentation**, letter templates, and additional advocacy resources. I encourage you to reach out to teachers, faculty, and others who are invested in the future of special education and urge them to participate by **writing letters and making calls**.

I hope you will join me in this critical advocacy effort. Please feel free to share this message widely, and do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions or need further support. ■

Luann L. Ley Davis, PhD
DADD CAN Coordinator
leydavis@etsu.edu

Students' Corner

On Campus Transition Programs: Perspective from Two Students



Jocelyn Hunter
Radford University



Jera Lewis
Radford University

The transition from high school to college is a significant milestone for any student, but for students with disabilities, the journey can come with unique challenges. Many colleges and universities have established On-Campus Transition Programs (OCTPs) that promote inclusive social and learning opportunities for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Such programs are designed to support students as they navigate through an important life transition, while offering a range of services to support and advance academic, social, and life skills while also fostering independence and self-advocacy. Radford University, a small rural university located in southwestern Virginia, has a well-established OCTP that promotes diversity, equity, and inclusion across campus. Students enrolled in the OCTP (i.e., mentees) attend classes, acquire job skills and paid employment, and make friends along the way! Together, as an undergraduate student and peer mentee and mentor, we collaboratively worked on this article to share our experiences.

Peer Mentee Perspective

As a senior at Radford University, I stay busy in both the academic and social aspects of college life. Like a lot of college students, I attend class, I have a job, and I enjoy spending time with friends. I am taking two classes this semester, Human Development and Physical Education (PE). The PE class is my favorite, and I especially love playing basketball!

Since being in college and part of the OCTP, I have learned a lot. I get help in my classes and with other things when I need it, and I have learned a lot of skills that help me at work. I work at an on-campus Starbucks. I really like going to work and I work hard. I have made a lot of friends through the OCTP, and my friends are really important to me. I love my peer mentors, and I like spending time with them every day. My peer mentors go with me to class and other places on campus—we hang out a lot. I love being in college, it is a lot of fun!

Peer Mentor Perspective

I can say that the OCTP has completely changed my outlook on inclusive learning and will make me a better teacher in the future. Being a peer mentor in the OCTP has had a profound impact on my understanding of inclusive learning and has shaped my experience as a student in ways I hadn't expected. As a junior majoring in Social Sciences with aspirations of becoming a secondary history teacher, I've always been passionate about education and creating environments where every student feels valued and supported. While my coursework in special education has provided important theoretical knowledge, my role as a

peer mentor has given me invaluable hands-on experiences that I know will influence my approach to inclusive teaching in the future. Working closely with my friends in the OCTP has taught me so much about what true inclusion looks like in practice. It's not just about providing accommodations or support—it's about fostering a sense of belonging and ensuring that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, abilities, or needs, have the tools and confidence to succeed. I've learned how to adapt my communication, be patient and understanding, and work alongside students to help them achieve their goals. Most importantly, I have had seen how capable my friends are and how important it is to set high expectations for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

My experiences with the OCTP have opened my eyes to the diverse ways in which students learn and the importance of tailoring support to meet individual needs. I encourage all college students to get involved with OCTP if you have the opportunity! I have had so much fun, and my experiences have shaped who I will be as an educator. Further, I've seen firsthand how empowering students through inclusive practices not only helps them succeed academically but also builds their self-esteem and independence. In a year and a half, when I step into the classroom as a teacher, I will carry these lessons with me, committed to creating spaces where all students can thrive—just as I've witnessed in the OCTP.

Final Thoughts

In sum, the OCTP at our university plays a pivotal role in helping students with intellectual and developmental disabilities foster independence, academic success, and build meaningful social connections. From our respective perspectives as a peer mentor and mentee, we feel the experiences we have shared highlight the program's impact and demonstrate the power of inclusion in higher education. The OCTP empowers us to thrive both academically and personally.

As a peer mentee, this program has helped me learn and feel supported. I like working and going to class, and being included and making friends in college is great.

As a peer mentor, I've gained valuable hands-on experience that has deepened my understanding of inclusive education, and I have gained life-long friends. This experience has shown me the importance of creating environments where every student feels supported and capable, and it will shape my approach to teaching as I work to create inclusive classrooms where all students can succeed. ■

DADD Student Poster Competition Winners

We are so excited to celebrate with the winners of the Student Poster Competition. The winners and their poster titles are:



Kate Anderson, Laura Gomez, and Peter Marti

First Place:

Laura Gomez, University of Florida

Working with Latinx Children with Autism: Professionals' Experiences

Second Place:

Peter Marti, Florida State University

*Autism Evidence-Based Practices: They May Be Effective...
But Do Consumers Like Them?*

Third Place:

Kate Anderson, The Ohio State University

*Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions, Early Childhood
Special Education, and Peers*



Editors' Note

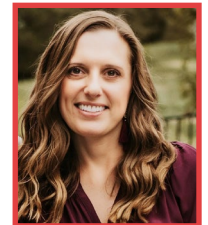
We hope you enjoyed this issue of *DADD Express*. As a community, we are committed to presenting content that supports individuals with ASD, ID, and DD, as well as diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ). We welcome and encourage our readership to contact us with content ideas and submission inquiries.

Interested in submitting to *DADD Express*? We would be delighted to hear from you! We are open to any topic related to individuals with ASD, ID, and DD.

Please submit potential manuscripts to us at alhorn1@radford.edu or slayden@odu.edu. ■



Selena J. Layden, PhD, BCBA-D, LBA
Old Dominion University



Annemarie L. Horn, PhD
Radford University

DADD Website:
<http://www.daddcec.com/>