**Trend Statement:**  
*Children with Special Needs*

**Department:** Child and Family Development  
FACS Extension

**State POW linkage:** Positive Development for CYF (Children, Youth & Families)

**Situation:**

More and more children of all ages are being diagnosed with special medical, communication, or educational needs. These children can participate in many typical educational and recreational activities with appropriate modifications. Many adults who are not familiar with certain disabilities do not feel comfortable working with children or youth with special needs. Extension can play a role in helping children, youth, and adults with special needs feel welcomed, accepted, and included in their communities.

**Trend:**

Increasing numbers of preschool, school-age, and adolescent youth are being diagnosed with special needs. During the 2000 – 2001 school year, the U. S. Department of Education recorded that 112,559 students in elementary and secondary schools in the United States had multiple diagnosed disabilities. Special needs can include physical challenges such as paraplegia, emotional challenges such as depression, cognitive challenges such as learning disabilities, and behavioral challenges such as ADHD. Children with special needs often rely on adaptations to their environment in order to succeed. Adaptations can include assistive technology (such as wheelchairs and computer programs), special assistance (such as testing accommodations for children with reading disabilities), and trained professionals who work regularly with the child. Early intervention can help young children with special needs make significant progress toward typical developmental milestones.

Early educational philosophy suggested that children with special needs were best taught in self-contained programs, in which they were segregated from typically-developing children and taught only with other children with similar disabilities. More recent research has shown that most children and youth (including those who are developing typically and those with special needs) benefit from inclusion settings. An inclusion program includes children with disabilities in all appropriate activities in the general education environment, with modifications and adaptations where appropriate. The opportunity for children with special needs to share in experiences with typically developing children has significant value for children both with and without special needs. By playing and learning together, children become aware of the similarities and differences between themselves and their peers. They also develop a sense that everyone, regardless of ability, makes important contributions.

Current research about special needs emphasizes that individuals with disabilities are individuals first. Unfortunately, children with special needs are often labeled by their differences and disabilities, even by the adults who provide their caregiving, education and other services.
Research suggests that the attitudes, beliefs and values of teachers and caregivers are potential barriers to the successful inclusion of children with disabilities in community-based and school settings. Many adults involved in caring for children with special needs have very little training in helping to manage those needs.

**Outlook:**

All public accommodations must comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which requires that persons with disabilities not be discriminated against on the basis of disability. Teachers, youth leaders and child care providers must provide children and parents with disabilities an equal opportunity to participate in educational programs and services, and must provide reasonable accommodations to include them. Most teachers and caregivers do not receive any specialized training to meet the special needs of children with disabilities, and may need help in developing skills necessary to teach in an inclusive educational environment. Many schools and child care centers are also ill-prepared to provide appropriate experiences for students with disabilities.

**Applications for County Programming:**

- Collaborate to include school system special education teachers in parenting education classes.
- Ensure that children with special needs have the opportunity to participate in all appropriate Extension-sponsored youth development activities, including 4-H.
- Teach child care workshops on inclusion, diversity, and specific special needs such as ADHD and language delays.
- Arrange for in-service training in special needs for teachers, caregivers, parents, and youth with and without special needs.
- Create youth and family activities that include and meaningfully involve children with special needs.
- Create buddy systems between youth with and without special needs.
- Use your knowledge in horticulture and animal projects to specifically involve children with special needs in activities where they can succeed.
- Work with your community to raise funds for a wheelchair-accessible community playground. Hold a community celebration with information about inclusion and children with special needs when the playground is dedicated.
- Connect families of children with special needs to community resources that help with diagnosis, intervention, and purchase of assistive technology.

**Specialist(s) supporting this issue:**

Diane Bales – Extension Human Development Specialist  
Don Bower – Extension Human Development Specialist  
Ted Futris – Extension Family Life Specialist  
Sharon Gibson – Extension CYFAR Coordinator  

**Available Resources to Support County Programming:**
• CYFERnet web site resources (www.cyfernet.org)
• NAEYC print and web site resources (www.naeyc.org)
• Inclusion coordinators at local child care resource and referral agencies (www.gaccrra.org)
• UGA Institute on Human Development and Disability (www.ihdd.uga.edu)