

A Parents' Guide to

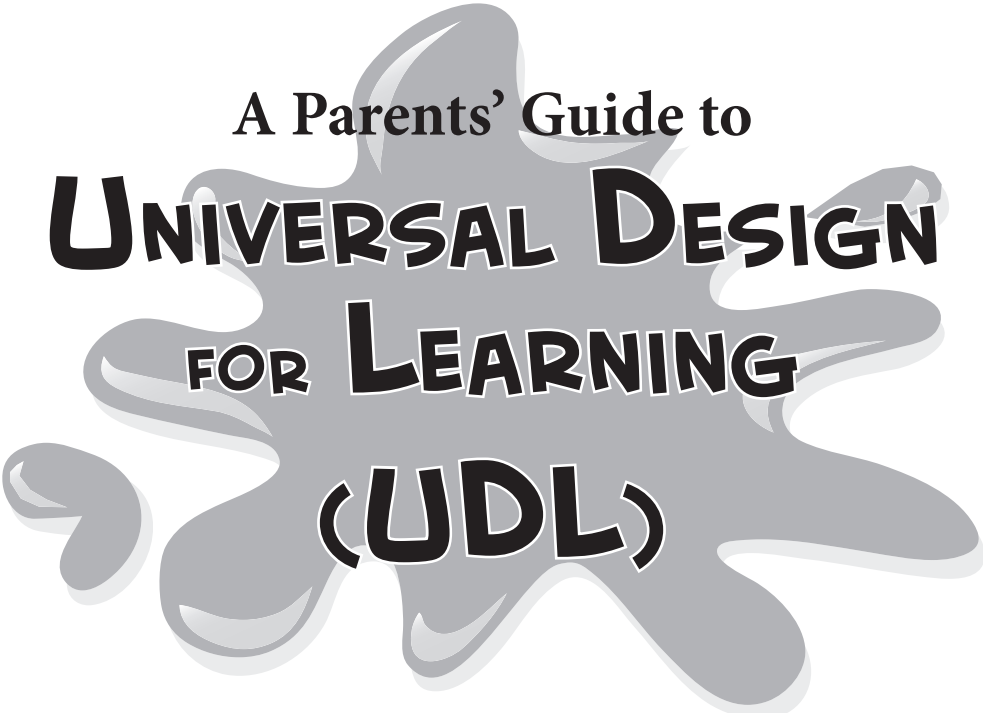
# UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING

(UDL)



TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE ALLIANCE FOR PARENT CENTERS  
NATIONAL TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER





A Parents' Guide to  
**UNIVERSAL DESIGN  
FOR LEARNING  
(UDL)**

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## **REGION 4**

### **Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities (OCECD)**

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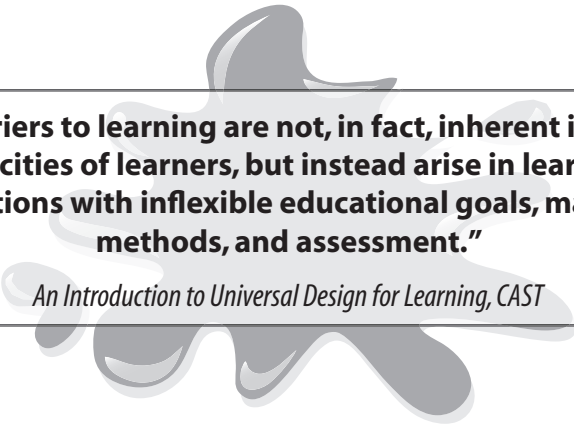
# PARENTS' GUIDE TO UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING

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## BACKGROUND

When the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed in 1975, it gave children with disabilities the right to receive a free and appropriate public education. Children with disabilities, however, often were faced with classroom materials that were print-based and not appropriate or adaptable for their diverse needs. Consequently, they were unable to access the education to which they were entitled.

The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) was founded by education researchers and clinicians in 1984 to address this problem. Its staff saw the use of printed materials as the most significant obstacle to accessing the curriculum. They believed that technology could be used to overcome this barrier.



**“Barriers to learning are not, in fact, inherent in the capacities of learners, but instead arise in learners’ interactions with inflexible educational goals, materials, methods, and assessment.”**

*An Introduction to Universal Design for Learning, CAST*

By the early 1990s, the concept had evolved into Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL involves more than just technology; it is a different way of thinking about teaching and learning. It says that the curriculum, not the student, needs to change. UDL helps all students—with and without disabilities—participate in their education. CAST continues to be the leader in UDL research, strategies, resources, and policymaking.

Universal design originated in the field of architecture. Architects realized that it was easier to design structures with accessibility features built in from the beginning than to retrofit them later. They also discovered that universal design solutions benefit a variety of people, not just those with disabilities. Curb cuts, for example, help people who use wheelchairs and also those who are pushing strollers or carts. Closed captioning is useful not only to people with hearing impairments but also to those who are learning English or are in a crowded public space, such as an airport or a gym. Ron Mace, the architect who originated universal design, said, “Consider the needs to the broadest possible range of users from the beginning.” This same philosophy is used when applying the concept of universal design to learning.

UDL is more important now than ever. When IDEA was reauthorized in 1997, the new law said that children with disabilities have the right to access, participate in, and make progress in the general education curriculum. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 reinforced this expectation by holding schools accountable for the academic achievement of all students, including those with disabilities. UDL is an important method for improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

## UDL AND THE CURRICULUM

UDL is “an educational approach to teaching, learning, and assessment, drawing on new brain research and new media technologies to respond to individual learner differences,” according to CAST’s *An Introduction to Universal Design for Learning*. Its purpose is to improve students’ access to the general curriculum. A curriculum defines what information should be taught, how teachers should present the information, what materials should be used by the students, and how the students should be tested on what they have learned.

In order to progress and participate in the general curriculum, students need both physical and cognitive access. Physical access includes sensory and motor access—the ability to see or hear text and manipulate educational tools such as textbooks, keyboards, or pencils and paper. Cognitive access is the ability to understand the assignments and plan how to complete them. UDL ensures that students have both physical and cognitive access to the general curriculum.

### **What is the General Curriculum?**

“The general curriculum is the overall plan for instruction adopted by a school or school system. Its purpose is to guide instructional activities and provide consistency of expectations, content, methods, and outcomes across different classrooms in each school or school system.”

*Technical Brief: Access, Participation, and Progress in the General Curriculum, Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson*

## **UDL HAS THREE MAIN PRINCIPLES:**

### ***1. Provide multiple, flexible methods of presentation.***

This principle applies to how the curriculum is designed and what teaching methods are used to present it. For example, materials should be available in digital formats (such as on a CD-ROM or other method accessible by computer) and include options such as text, speech, Braille, video, or audio\*. Additionally, the information should be presented in a variety of ways (not just lecture) that involve multiple senses.

### ***2. Provide multiple, flexible methods of action and expression.***

Students should be able to demonstrate what they have learned in a variety of ways, such as multiple choice tests, essays, oral exams, group work, and presentations.

### ***3. Provide multiple, flexible options for engagement.***

Engagement means giving students the right degree of challenge and motivation. Some students may need little structure and support, while others may require more direction and guidance. For example, if students were told to conduct a science experiment and report the results to the class, some would be able to do so without additional instructions. Others, however, might need an outline describing each step, from choosing a topic to presenting the information. Also, the curriculum should be adaptable so students are motivated to study topics that are relevant to their own lives.

## **Several beliefs underlie the UDL philosophy and its three principles:**

- The “universal” in “Universal Design for Learning” does not mean that one solution will enable every child to access the general curriculum. “Universal” means that the curriculum will include enough alternatives and flexibility so all children have the opportunity to learn.

*\*IDEA 2004 mandated the development of a National Instructional Materials Accessibility Standard (NIMAS) to ensure timely delivery of specialized formats of instructional materials. For more information, go to: <http://nimas.cast.org>.*

- All classrooms are diverse, whether or not they include children with disabilities. The flexibility and options that are a part of UDL will benefit all children.
- It's the curriculum, not the student, that needs to change. Alternatives should be built into the curriculum when it is initially designed, instead of being added along the way.
- General and special education teachers should work together to plan the curriculum and lesson plans.

UDL allows students with differences in their ability to engage in various tasks (seeing, hearing, reading, speaking, moving, and paying attention) to learn the content of the general curriculum and demonstrate their knowledge.

## **ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY VERSUS UDL**

Assistive technology (AT) and UDL are related but different. Both increase access and positive outcomes for students with disabilities, and both often involve technology. What differentiates them is their approach to the problem of an inaccessible curriculum.

AT uses electronic and other tools to make inaccessible learning tasks or environments accessible. It is used after a curriculum is developed when an individual student encounters an accessibility problem. For example, a student who has limited motor skills may need to use a trackball instead of a mouse when using a computer.

UDL aims to solve accessibility problems before a student ever encounters them. As the curriculum is developed, alternatives such as digitized text and interactive software are built in so that changes are not needed later to accommodate individual students' needs. With UDL, for example, it would no longer be necessary to use AT to scan books into the computer for a student who is blind, because the text would already be available in a digitized format.

Even when using a UDL curriculum, however, the need for AT remains. For example, a child who cannot speak would still need an augmentative communication device. UDL does, however, decrease the need for “add-on” fixes to an inaccessible curriculum.

## **UDL IN THE CLASSROOM**

In a UDL classroom, the focus is on flexibility and alternatives. Consequently, there is no “one right way” to do it and no two classrooms will look the same.

In all cases, however, the goal is to present information in a variety of ways, such as group work, hands-on activities, storytelling, and multimedia presentations. Technology, which can eliminate many barriers to learning, is often used. Digitized books, for example, can be read aloud, or the color, size, and spacing of the words can be changed. They may even include interactive learning tools such as comprehension or vocabulary quizzes so students can demonstrate that they understand what they are reading.

When applying UDL techniques, curriculum designers and teachers must consider all types of diversity, such as individual skills, learning styles and preferences, gender, culture, abilities, and disabilities. The following techniques can help all students to participate and learn:

- Room and equipment should be physically accessible to all students
- Information should be presented using large visual and tactile aids
- The curriculum content should be made relevant to the students’ lives
- Content should be presented without using unnecessary jargon or complexity and should accommodate a wide variety of language skills

- Multimedia should be captioned and audio-described
- Computer software and Web sites should be accessible to all students, including those using assistive technology
- Flexible, digital curricula should include such things as study questions, chapter outlines, vocabulary lists, and background information
- Students should be given ongoing feedback and opportunities to make corrections
- Assessments should have minimal time constraints, when appropriate

## **PARENTS AND UDL**

Parents do not always have control over what curriculum is used in their child's classroom. They can, however, take steps to help promote UDL in their child's school.

Parents can ask their child's teachers if they are familiar with the concept of UDL. They can make sure their child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) includes related goals that will give their child the same access to the curriculum as other students.

Parents can also advocate with their local school board or state department of education for policies that promote UDL. They can advocate for policies that require new textbooks and curricula to be accessible for students with disabilities.

## **CONCLUSION**

UDL helps all students, with and without disabilities, to access, participate in, and progress in the general curriculum. By embedding alternatives and flexibility into the curriculum, students are able to learn and show their knowledge in a variety of ways that match their unique learning styles. UDL removes unnecessary barriers so students are more able to reach their full potential.

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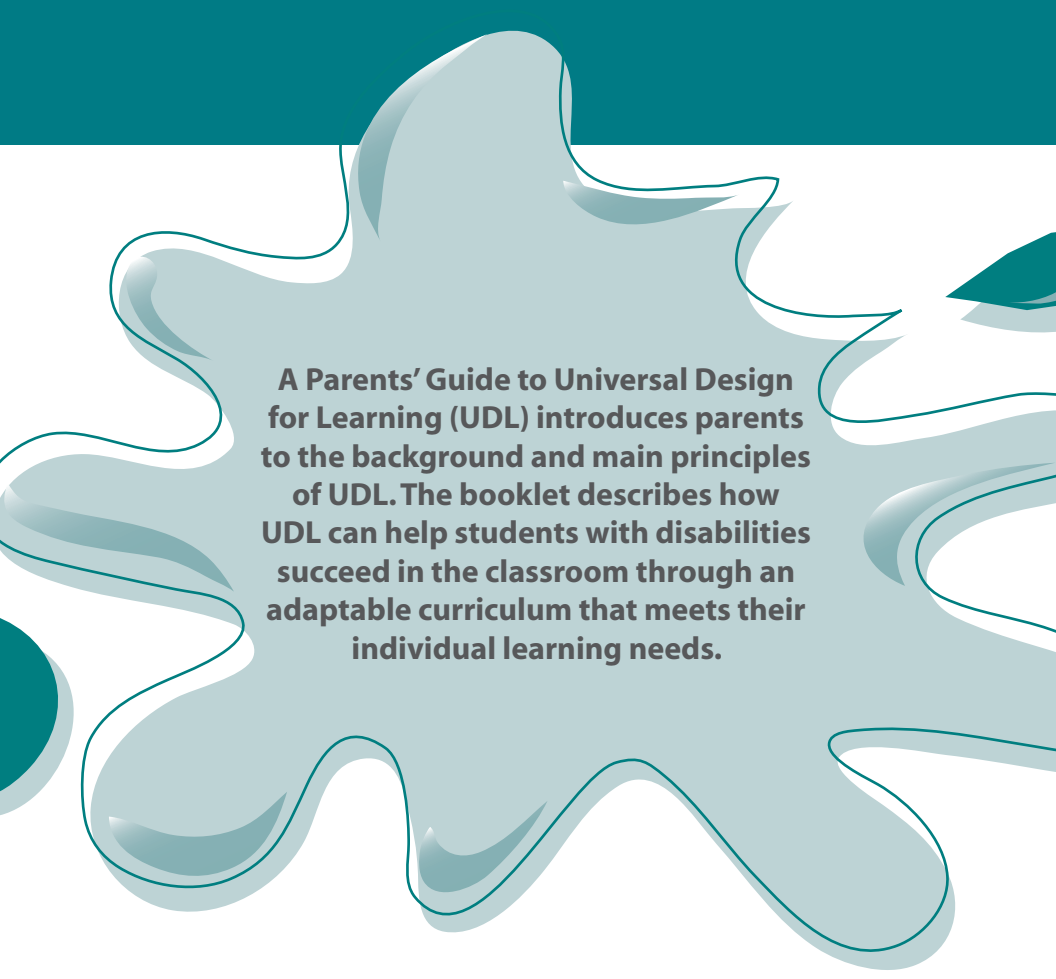
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**A Parents' Guide to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) introduces parents to the background and main principles of UDL. The booklet describes how UDL can help students with disabilities succeed in the classroom through an adaptable curriculum that meets their individual learning needs.**

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**CONTACT YOUR LOCAL PARENT CENTER:**

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