Leveling the Playing Field: Strategies for Inclusion

By Matthew R. Martin and Laura Speer

For both new and experienced physical educators, learning how to plan, manage, and expand developmentally appropriate activities for special needs children can be a daunting task.

A recent trend is when students with disabilities are placed in the general education classroom with their non-disabled peers in a least restrictive environment (Block, 1999). Specific to physical education, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states that, “Each child with a disability must have the opportunity to participate in the regular physical education program available to the non-disabled children, unless the child is enrolled full-time in separate facilities or needs specially designed physical education as prescribed in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act,” (Winnick, 1995, p10).

Many physical educators have reported that they lack the necessary skills, experience, and educational background to accommodate the individual differences of all students (Chandler & Green, 1995). Specifically, they have stated the need for additional educational support and in-service training to learn more about specific disability conditions and behavioral management techniques (Klavina, Blocks, & Larins, 2007; Marston & Leslie, 1983).

This article summarizes the highlights of a one-day adapted physical education workshop, delivered to an audience of physical educators and undergraduate physical education students. Three experienced adapted physical educators and an individual who works full time for the Special Olympics shared their knowledge and expertise with the participants.

The workshop was designed to provide the physical educators and teacher-trainees with tips and suggestions for working with adapted students in inclusive settings. As undergraduates, most of the physical educators participating in the workshop had little or no training working with adapted students, nor did they receive any in-service training in their current positions. Yet, they were required to include special needs students into their physical education classes. In this article, a sample behavioral management technique will be discussed. Next, a summary will be provided of modifications and adaptations that can be used in inclusive physical education settings. And finally, four activities will be outlined.

Behavior Management Strategy

Students with special needs sometimes resist participating in physical education activities and, in turn, need assistance from their teacher to build a level of comfort when introducing skills and activities. Students who are uncomfortable or are having difficulty coping may demonstrate off-task or unacceptable behavior. As a starting point, teachers need to understand what reasons or antecedents are causing students to be off-task or not ready to participate. A behavioral rubric helps document and track behavior.

This type of rubric is used as an assessment to track behavior, provide feedback, and set goals for students.
### Table 1. Behavioral Task Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson Activity/Behavior</th>
<th>Rating (Draw Happy or Straight Faces)</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entering/Exiting the Gym</td>
<td></td>
<td>He sat down quietly after entering the gym. Walked quietly after exiting the gym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in Warm-Ups</td>
<td></td>
<td>Refused to participate. Stood in the corner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following Directions</td>
<td></td>
<td>After the warm-ups, he paid attention to Activity #1 directions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in Lesson Activities</td>
<td></td>
<td>Completed three of the five basketball skill station tasks. Increased from two out of five from previous lesson.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions</td>
<td></td>
<td>Transitioned quickly to begin Activity #1 and followed directions during the lesson’s final transition.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Overall Comments/Goals for Future Lessons:**
Complete three of the six warm-up exercises (will earn three happy faces and a sticker). Complete four of the five basketball skill stations.

For example, the rubric should include a list of common behaviors/activities that students will be asked to do on a daily basis during physical education, such as: entering and exiting the gymnasium; participating in warm-up activities; following directions; transitions; and participating in lesson activities (see Table 1).

When developing a behavioral rubric, it’s important to list the behaviors on the rubric in chronological order (i.e., order of lesson) to document when behaviors occur and to look for patterns of occurrence. For example, some students have difficulty entering the gymnasium and being ready to learn. In these circumstances, it’s important to document the frequency and exact time and place when the off-task or disruptive behavior occurred on the behavioral rubric. Also, it helps to find out what the student has been doing prior to entering the gymnasium that might have contributed to their difficulties.

The assessment rubric should be simple and easy to use. As an example, when a particular student is on-task and following directions, the teacher draws a “happy face” (see Table 1) next to the behavior, which indicates the student is doing a good job during that particular component of the class. If the student is not participating and/or following directions a “straight face” is drawn next to the behavior, which indicates the need for improvement (see Table 1).

Behavioral rubrics are an effective method of providing behavioral feedback for students who have cognitive delays, hearing impairments, and/or challenges reading, since the instructor can point at the pictures to give students feedback. Feedback should be simple, concrete, and brief. For instance, “Yesterday, you completed three of the exercise stations. Today, I want you to complete five stations.” If the student completes the five stations, the teacher draws a happy face on the rubric. If the student doesn’t complete all five stations, the instructor draws a straight face on the rubric. Unless the student’s safety is in jeopardy, no explanation or negative feedback should be provided during the lesson. This type of assessment teaches students to be responsible for their behavior and choices. In most situations, it’s best to provide feedback in a direct but non-emotional manner. The student owns their behavior. It’s their choice if they want to follow directions and/or participate in the class.

**Suggestions for Modifying Lessons, Activities or Equipment**

When including special needs students in the regular classroom, teachers must think “outside the box.” In other words, one should think of
creative ways to modify activities and equipment that will allow special needs children to participate to the best of their ability with their non-disabled peers. Below are some suggestions that can help special needs students be successful in physical education.

**Leveling the Playing Field**

A modification, Leveling the Playing Field, can be used when playing team sports or participating in sports-related drills. For instance, during team sports units, some teams could have additional players, including special needs students in order to make the teams equal. Also, during skill practice, it’s important to change the criterion for success to match the needs and abilities of the learner. For example, special needs students may work at a slower pace than their peers and need more practice time in order to gain a comparable outcome to their non-disabled peers.

**Two People Equals One Player**

Non-disabled students, para-professionals and adapted physical education teachers can help special needs students during closed or open skill practice by participating with them. For example, an individual in a wheelchair can’t move and catch the ball at the same time during a competitive basketball game. The teacher can call upon a non-disabled student to partner up with the disabled student. The former is asked to catch and hand the ball to the special needs student during game play and stay in close proximity with their partner. However, the non-disabled partner should not limit his own playing abilities. Instead, he should play as he normally plays.

**Allow a Lull in the Action**

A third strategy, Allowing a Lull in the Action, enables special needs students to participate in games and team sports successfully. For instance, during a 4-on-4 basketball game, one rule that helps individuals in wheel chairs and special needs students participate successfully is to not allow the non-disabled students to intercept the ball, deflect passes, or block the special need students’ shots. Another lull in the action might be needed if students have difficulty remembering who is on their team or if they need game rules clarified.

In addition, many special needs students need a longer response time during skill practice and game play, and/or more time to complete a task (e.g., making a pass during a basketball game) because of the physical and/or cognitive symptoms related to their disability. Thus, a lull in the action can be used.

**Parallel Play**

Some special needs students may not be ready to participate in competitive game play with non-disabled students because of the nature of their disability, level of anxiety, or the need for more practice. In these circumstances, special needs students can participate in modified games or closed skill practice until they are ready to get involved in competitive games. For example, when doing a volleyball serving drill where the students serve to a partner, one can set up a station for students who are not ready to serve on the official court. The serving station can use a smaller court in which the students are required to serve at a target on the floor or wall, while the other students practice serving at the regulation distance.

When incorporating the parallel play technique, it is recommended that teachers use non-disabled students as peer tutor instructors by rotating them periodically to the station or playing area where the special needs students are practicing. This is an opportunity for the peer instructors to show empathy and feel satisfaction in helping others. It also makes the special needs students feel a part of the class.

**Four Fun Station Activities**

**Striking Station**

The striking station is easy to set up. The equipment includes two volleyball or badminton poles, a rope, balloons and a roll of string. The balloons hang from a rope that extends horizontally across the two poles. At this station, students practice striking with an implement (e.g., tennis racquet, paddle, hockey stick, large fly swatter) or hand. The balloon height can be easily adjusted to accommodate students in wheel chairs and students of various heights by quickly changing the knot in the balloon. Students can also practice the volleyball set and the set shot in basketball by sitting on the floor or chair and practicing the fundamental cues.

**Body Bowling/Bowling**

Body bowling offers a fun tumbling activity where students practice rolling across a mat to knock over pins with their body. The equipment for this station, designed for rolling practice, includes styrofoam bowling pins and a mat. At this station, students can also practice bowling. Wheelchair students can use a bowling ramp to help them bowl successfully.

**Cupid Shuffle**

A simple dance, known as the Cupid Shuffle, includes the basic dance steps of more complex dances. To begin the dance, step four times to the right and then four times to the left. Students in wheelchairs can take four turns going forward and four turns going back. Next, students kick their right leg (heel touch) and left leg (heel touch) twice. Students who do not have full use of their legs can move their hands instead of their feet. And for the last step in the sequence, students do a quarter turn. The entire sequence is repeated.

Dance benefits students by helping them work on their spatial awareness, balance, and coordination skills. Through dance, students also have to learn dance progressions and sequencing, which addresses the cognitive aspects of learning.

**Bocce Ball**

Played on a 12-foot-wide and 60-foot-long court, bocce ball is one of the activities included in the Special Olympics program. A closed skill activity, bocce ball appeals to many students because it’s easy to learn and doesn’t re-
quire a high level of skill to participate.

To facilitate playing the game in the gymnasium, bean bags can be used instead of bocce balls. Students can play singles, doubles, or make teams of four. Each team gets four bean bags. The teacher picks one player from the starting team and asks him to throw the pallina (yellow bean bag) toward the opposite end of the playing surface. The pallina is the marker for the game. The object of bocce ball is to get the ball (i.e., bean bags) closest to the pallina without touching it. A point is scored for the same color bean bags that are closest to the pallina. For example, if two blue bags are closest to the yellow bean bag (pallina), then the blue team gets two points. (See www.specialolympics.org for official game rules.)

The equipment needed to set up the court includes either court tape or a set of half cones, a tape measure, one yellow bean bag to use as the pallina, and four green, blue, red, orange, and purple bean bags.

Conclusion
Many school districts across the country do not hire adapted physical education specialists to work with special needs students. In fact, in many schools the physical education teacher is responsible for teaching special needs students along with the general student population. The information and suggestions included in this article provide physical educators with information and strategies to design developmentally appropriate activities and lessons that meet the needs of all learners.

References


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