

Welcoming Children With Disabilities Into Regular Physical Education

by **Martin E. Block and William Brady**

Including children with disabilities in regular physical education creates opportunities for children without disabilities (a) to learn about disability, (b) to become more aware of and sensitive to individual differences, and (c) to be less fearful of and more willing to interact and befriend children who may seem different (Block, 1994). Yet, simply placing a child with a disability in a regular physical education class will not ensure that the other children will be understanding, accepting, and friendly. In fact, placing children with disabilities into regular physical education without preparing the other children may elicit insensitive comments such as "Why is *he* in my class?" "Why is *she* making all those weird noises?" "Why does *he* get to run around without following directions?" "Why does *she* have to be on my team?" And "*he* will ruin the game for everyone." How can a physical educator help children without disabilities be more accepting of children with disabilities?

There are two ways a teacher can create an environment that truly welcomes children with disabilities into his or her gymnasium. First, a physical educator should remember to be open minded, to model appropriate behavior, to include the child in activities whenever possible, to encourage peer interaction, and to learn as much about the child as possible. Second, a physical educators should prepare the disabled student's peers by explaining general information about the disability, by highlighting specific children with disabilities in their physical education class, and by explaining how to interact with and befriend children with disabilities.

Teacher Behaviors

Have a Positive Attitude

It is very reasonable for you as a regular physical educator to feel nervous and even incompetent when working with children who have disabilities. In fact such feelings are quite common among regular physical educators (Jarney, Snell, Beers, & Raynes, 1995; LaMaster, Gall, Kinchin, & Siddentop, 1998). But these feeling should not be used as an excuse to avoid students or to ignore them when they enter your program. Commit yourself to giving it your best shot, learn about the child with disabilities, and be willing to experiment with different ways to best include him or her. There are plenty of resources in or around your school district (special education teachers, therapists, adapted physical education specialist, other regular physical educators) who can help you with the mechanics of how to safely and successfully include children with disabilities. But

the first step is a simple willingness to try your best. You will be surprised how quickly you will become an expert on how to work with, motivate, and help your students with disabilities.

Model Appropriate Behavior

Many children learn how to act around children with disabilities by modeling behavior of respected adults such as their physical educator. One of the simplest things you can do to show that you welcome children with disabilities is to model welcoming, friendly behavior through your actions and words. Greet and talk to the child with disabilities just as you do other children, even if the child does not fully understand what you are saying. Pats on the back, high fives, choosing the child first, and simply calling out the child's name during activities (e.g., "Way to push your wheelchair, Billy!") are other ways to show that the child is a capable member of the group.

Include the Child in Activities Whenever Possible

Include the child in as many activities as possible. This includes warm-ups, skill and drill work, and even games. While modifications may be necessary to safely and fairly include the child, the child should be part of the larger group as much as possible. For example, a child with a mental impairment who cannot keep up with the fast warm-up routine of a fifth grade class can still warm-up with the group. The child should be encouraged to focus on three or four key warm-up activities (e.g., sit-ups, push-ups, jumping jacks, and hurdler stretches) rather than all the movements. Also, the child may be positioned closer to you so that you can give him extra feedback. Similarly, in a lead-up game of soccer, a child in a wheelchair can participate by using his or her hands instead of feet and by being positioned in a special zone near the perimeter of the field so that other children do not run into his or her wheelchair. (See Block, 1994; Kasser, 1995; Morris & Steihl, 1988, for other examples of modifications to activities and games.)

Reinforce Positive Interactions

Encourage peers to befriend the child with disabilities by being his or her partner, including him or her on their team, and generally interacting with the child during activities. The simple act of asking a child with a disability to be part of a group or team can do wonders for this child's self-esteem. When necessary, also encourage peers to help the child with a disability know where to go and what to do during physical education. This is particularly true for children with mental impairments or autism who might not understand exactly what is going on in physical education. Note that you should not assign a single student to assist the child with a disability for an entire period, because that peer will miss out on his or her physical education practice time. Also,

encourage peers to provide as little assistance as possible rather than "mothering" children with disabilities. Just as you reinforce positive interactions, do not tolerate teasing or negative interactions. If you hear teasing or if you see children excluding the child with disabilities, it may be necessary to talk to those peers or to the class about the child and his or her needs.

Be Knowledgeable About the Child

While it is impossible to know everything about the child with disabilities, basic information is important. This information includes:

1. Medical and health information: Does the child take medications? Are there any activities the child should not participate in due to health concerns?
2. How to communicate with the child: Does the child understand verbal directions, or does he or she need more demonstrations and physical assistance?
3. How to deal with behavior problems: Is the child aggressive, withdrawn, impulsive, hyperactive, a wanderer? What is the behavior plan to deal with these behaviors?
4. Any activity that the child really enjoys: reinforcers that can be used to motivate the child to participate and demonstrate appropriate behaviors.

This information can be obtained from the child's parents, special education teacher, therapists, and in some cases even the child himself or herself.

Arming yourself with knowledge about the child will help you create individualized accommodations and help you explain your actions to peers. For example, some children with Down syndrome will refuse to participate in certain activities. It will be important to find out from the child's parents and special education teacher how they deal with this type of behavior when it occurs in physical education class. You also will want to explain this behavior plan to peers, so they know what is going on. The key is to know as much as possible about the child so you can accommodate his or her unique needs and help peers understand why you are making certain modifications.

Preparing Students

Explain About Disabilities in General

Most elementary-aged children are naturally curious about why a child has to use a wheelchair, why a child is making funny sounds, or why a child can't talk. Take advantage of this natural curiosity and explain about disabilities in general terms. For example, you can plan activities that promote an awareness of disabilities such as blindfolding children (to experience blindness), requiring children to use wheelchairs, encouraging children to communicate without speaking, inviting a guest speaker who, though disabled, excels in a sport (sponsor a game between wheelchair basketball players and the faculty), or simply showing a videotape from the Paralympics or Special Olympics (Block, 1994; Kayes, 1992). It is very important during these activities and in follow-up discussions to explain to children why some people need to use canes to get around, and why others need wheelchairs. Explain why some people do not understand concepts as quickly as others, and why some children might

behave differently. The point is to make the children more aware and sensitive to the idea of disabilities.

Explain About Specific Children With Disabilities in Their Class

While general information about disabilities is important, children will want to know about specific children in their physical education class. Take the time to explain to children without disabilities who the child with a disability is, what he or she likes and doesn't like, what behaviors might be exhibited, what modification you might implement, and how important it is for this child to feel like part of the group. This discussion should take place before the child with a disability starts attending physical education class. In addition, you may want to speak with the child (when appropriate), the child's regular and special education teachers, and the child's parents, to be sure such a discussion is necessary and appropriate.

For example, some children with mild disabilities may not want their peers to know that they have hearing loss, vision problems, cognitive problems, learning disabilities, or medical-health problems. If these relatively mild problems are not causing great concerns, and if the child seems to be making appropriate modifications (by himself or herself or with your help), then there may be no need to single out the child.

On the other hand, when children look physically different, require major modifications to be successful in physical education, or exhibit aberrant behaviors that cause peers to stare or stay away from the child, then it makes sense to provide specific information to his or her peers. Such information may include the name and nature of the child's disability, the way the disability affects this particular child, and why the child uses certain equipment, requires certain modifications, or behaves in certain ways.

It also is important to point out similarities between the child with disabilities and his or her nondisabled classmates. This helps peers realize that, while the child may be different in some ways, he or she is like them in other ways. For example, explaining to peers that a child with severe mental impairment enjoys playing basketball and watching it on TV with his dad, looks up to Michael Jordan, does not like spinach but loves pizza, hates getting up in the morning for school, and loves listening to the Beastie Boys—these traits help peers realize that this child has common likes and dislikes. If you do not feel comfortable making this presentation, invite the child's parents or special education teacher to talk to your class.

Explain How to Interact With Specific Children

Many children may want to interact with a child who has a disability, but they are not quite sure how to approach the child or whether it is appropriate. For example, some children with more severe disabilities come to physical education with a teacher assistant. Peers see the teacher assistant helping the child with disabilities and conclude that they are not supposed to interact with or include the child. Explain to peers that it is right and important to interact with the child with disabilities. Also explain how important it is for this child to have lots of opportunities to interact with peers and really feel like part of the class. Explain how to speak with the child (if the child has unique communication techniques), how to include the child in activities (what simple modifications might work), and how to befriend the

child (making the child feel more a part of the group by patting him or her on the back, giving high fives, encouraging the child to be part of their team).

For example, many elementary-aged children would love to learn basic signs, so they can communicate with a deaf child or a child with autism who uses sign language. Similarly, it can be fun and challenging for peers to figure out the best way to modify various physical education activities to include peers who use wheelchairs or peers who are blind. Simply explaining that it is alright to interact with classmates with disabilities, then offering some suggestions will help peers be more understanding and welcoming to these children.

Note that these discussions may need to take place several times during the school year. For example, children may be very friendly and helpful to a child with mental retardation in the beginning of the school year when inclusion is still novel. However, after several months, children may begin to ignore the child or forget that the child needs some modifications to activities to participate successfully. In such cases you may need to sit down with the group again to remind them of the child's needs and how to help this child feel a part of the class.

Summary

Perhaps the greatest benefits from including children with disabilities in regular physical education is the opportunity it creates for children with disabilities to interact with peers, make friends, and feel like a member of the group. Yet, such

benefits will not occur if children with disabilities are simply placed in regular physical education. The regular physical educator and nondisabled peers have to welcome the child by learning about him or her, by genuinely including the child in regular activities whenever possible, and by showing the child that he or she is welcome and a true member of the class.

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FROM THE EDITORS

"Peaks of Excellence, Valleys of Despair"

What is the Future of Physical Education?

by Steve Sanders and Dawn McCrumb

As we usher in 1999, the last year of the decade, the century, and the millenium, let's take time to imagine the future of physical education. We would like to dream the dream, push the limit, and extend our vision as well as yours—though we do not necessarily see the optimistic picture we would like. We invite you to join our public discussion and journey into the future. First, though, we must critically examine our present circumstances.

As teacher educators, we talk to colleagues and visit schools, and we hear about and observe dozens of examples of high quality physical education programs at elementary and middle schools. These "peaks of excellence" propel us to continue preparing teachers to help children become physically active for a lifetime. We also visit schools and hear about many programs that are far from appropriate. These troubling "valleys of despair" focus our attention on preparing teachers to change the way physical education for children is taught.

Recently, Daryl Siedentop and Larry Locke (1997) defined the present state of physical education this way:

If good physical education programs are those in which most students are enthusiastically engaged in learning, which leads them to so value physical activity that they are compelled to adopt a physically active lifestyle, then many school programs are not good. The quality and viability of school physical education programs has been questioned for more than a decade with no apparent widespread improvements. (p. 25)

The truth is, high quality, innovative programs do exist and continue to get better, while poor programs continue to make us all look incompetent and increase the public's distaste for physical activity of any kind.

So what does the future hold? Where do we go from here?

Imagine a future 20 years from now where physical education programs are all in a valley of despair. In fact, physical education programs have largely been eliminated from schools, because they failed the test of accountability. Children were not learning in physical education. In their place, schools finance new sport programs. Sport remains only for the elite, but practice takes place during school hours. A small group of elementary students attend "athletic education" class during second period to practice basketball or soccer, while the rest of the students remain in their classrooms to complete extra work. Only students with obvious athletic skill are on sport teams. Meanwhile, music and art programs have been extended to give classroom teachers the break time they lost when physical education was discontinued.

Now imagine a future 20 years from now where physical education programs take center stage in the school. Every child has high quality instruction provided daily by a specialist, and physical activity is centrally important to children, teachers, and parents. As sites of physical activity, gymnasiums are at the center of schools and the community, and appropriate equipment and technology for learning and assessment are readily available.

"Peaks of Excellence, Valleys of Despair" continued on following page

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TEPE Mission Statement

Teaching Elementary Physical Education (TEPE) is intended to serve as an independent voice for elementary and middle school physical educators by providing the most up-to-date information available related to child development, teaching methods, curriculum, assessment, and professional issues related to teaching physical education. This information is provided to help teachers create and maintain quality, developmentally appropriate programs that assist children in becoming physically active for a lifetime. TEPE publishes original articles based on developmentally appropriate practices and serves as a forum to share perspectives on all issues related to

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