



Caring for Children with *special needs*

PHYSICAL DIFFERENCES AND IMPAIRMENTS

Here's an important message from parents whose children have physical disabilities:

Our society has an underlying value structure that makes us think of disability in terms of "tragedy," having an "impaired body" or being "abnormal." We must change this negative definition. Many things that make a person "disabled" have to do with not having access to his or her environment. A flight of stairs makes a person who uses a wheelchair disabled. Put in a ramp and the disability disappears—until that person gets to a narrow doorway.

It's impossible to make generalizations about children who have physical differences. Susie has slight cerebral palsy that interferes somewhat with the way she walks. Vernon was born with no fingers on his hands, but he can do many things for himself. Tanisha has multiple disabilities, but she uses a wheelchair and other adaptive equipment. Each child has different needs and different solutions. Adaptation is a matter of thinking things through, step-by-step, and making common-sense changes as needed.

As someone who cares for a child with physical differences or impairments, you need to become as knowledgeable as possible about the child and the disability or impairment. Ask for advice from the child's parents, occupational or physical therapists, special education teacher, or other people who have been working with the child. You also might want to get informa-

tion from one of the many national organizations that serve children with specific disabilities. For a partial list of these organizations, check information section on the back page of this publication.

Strategies for inclusion

In many ways, the ways you include a child with physical differences or impairments will benefit all children in your care. Here are some of the factors you will want to consider as you plan for the needs of children with physical differences or impairments.

- Create a safe environment for ALL children. Safety planning must include the specific needs of a child with a physical impairment. For example, a skidding rug is a hazard for all children, but it is especially hazardous for a child who uses crutches. It isn't enough to have traffic lanes wide enough for a wheelchair to

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navigate—the traffic lanes must be kept free of obstructions such as play equipment, chairs, and scattered toys. Your emergency exit plan must take into account a child with physical limitations. Make sure that all staff members know the plan.

■ **Make play materials (and play areas) accessible.**

Remember that a child who uses a walker to get around may not be able to carry toys from one place to another. Watch the child during periods of play. Are there areas that are inaccessible? Sometimes a play area seems accessible when there are no children playing in it, but in reality is too crowded or narrow when occupied by children. Are there play materials that the child with a physical impairment is trying to reach, but can't?

■ **Select and place toys, play materials, and play equipment to encourage social interaction.**

You can promote social interaction by being alert to what goes on naturally among children. You also can decide which children will play together in semi-structured activities. For example, you may want to pair two children in a rocking boat or provide a giant picture book to look at together. Include children in all activities. A child may not be able to take part in a particular game, but she can keep score; she may not be able to jump rope, but she can turn the rope. Look for meaningful ways to include all children in an activity.

■ **Arrange your environment so that children with ALL kinds of abilities can explore and play with the things you provide.**

Remember that some children cannot reach the floor (if he uses a wheelchair or walker) and some cannot get play materials off a high shelf. Other children may not be able to grasp and carry objects with both hands. Some children cannot lift and carry relatively heavy things. Your environment should reflect the needs of the children in your care.

■ **Create an environment that allows every child to be as independent as possible.**

Be creative about ordinary items, such as potty chairs and towels. For example, is the toilet paper accessible to a child who only uses her left hand? Joaquin has cerebral palsy and is just learning to feed himself. Does his dish slip around on the table when he scoops up his food with a spoon? A piece of inexpensive non-slip rug backing used as a placemat may prevent the plate from slipping around.

Even if a task takes longer for a child with a physical difficulty, let her try it first, without immediately rescuing her. Putting on a coat can be accomplished in many ways. One way that may work well for a child with a physical impairment is to place the child's opened coat on a child-sized chair (as though the child had slipped out of it while sitting on the chair) and have the child sit on that chair and slip her arms into the sleeves and shrug on the coat.

■ **Change rules when necessary.**

Adjust the rules of a game so that all children can play. This helps other children learn that we can accommodate for our friends who have different abilities. Having children help one another is good, too. For example, you can quietly comment about everyday interactions: "Jackson, when you held the door open for Stacey, it was easy for her to get her wheelchair through. See how she is smiling at you?"

■ **Give children an opportunity to express their concerns about physical differences.**

Respond to their questions in a casual but honest way. For example, in a circle game you may see Jolene wondering how to hold hands with Jennifer who is sitting in a wheelchair. This would offer an opportunity for you (and the child in the wheelchair) to point out that they can still hold hands, and that maybe Jolene can help push the wheelchair when it's time for Jennifer to turn around in place.

■ **Help your staff look at each child's needs.**

Remember that you cannot make generalizations. Think of the things a child **can** do, rather than things a child **cannot** do. Remind your staff that pity doesn't help anyone; we want to share a positive attitude. Parents may be struggling with their feelings, or they may be joyous about their child's accomplishments. Child care providers need to be positive and supportive.

■ **Brainstorm about solutions to various situations.**

Ask the child for guidance, try different solutions, consult with other people, and keep looking at ways to make things even **more** accessible in your program. Remember that activities change, children change, and we can always work on making areas accessible. Parents may have figured out a strategy that allows their child to accomplish a task. Therapists often have a lot of ideas for simple adaptations and modifications.

■ Consider the child's parents, who might be struggling, too.

Parents may have fears about their child being accepted. Here are some common comments from parents about their child's disability:

"I don't want teachers to see his little arm as the most important part of him. If a teacher will just take a few minutes and watch what he can do, she'll see that he can do everything. Sometimes he has to figure out how to do it, but gee just give him a chance."

"I like places that believe my child can do anything. They let Carrie try everything that other children are doing. If she can't do it 100 percent by herself, then they help with the little bit she can't do."

"Our family child care provider said that all the children went outside to play every day and that Gerri's wheelchair would be too much trouble to take outside. Now that I think about it, maybe a simple ramp could have been installed in the back of the house, or we could have left an older wheelchair to store in the garage for her to use during outside play. But we needed her at a center where outdoor accessibility was not a problem."

■ Keep in mind that you are a role model.

Child care providers teach children acceptable ways of relating to children with physical differences by how they act. These lessons stick with children long after they leave your care. Your goal is to teach kindness, inclusiveness, and appreciation for everybody's differences. It's up to you to set the tone.

Resources for caregivers

There are local, state, and national organizations that have a lot of information about various disabilities. Ask the staff at your local public library to help you find an organization in your area that can help, or for information on the World Wide Web. Here are a few national organizations that may be of interest:

- Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22901
- Muscular Dystrophy Association, 810 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019
- National Easter Seal Society, 2023 Ogden Avenue, Chicago, IL 60612
- Spina Bifida Association of America, 343 South Dearborn, Suite 319, Chicago, IL 60604
- United Cerebral Palsy Association, 1522 K Street, Washington, DC 20005

Technical references

- Allen, K.E. (1992). *The Exceptional Child: Mainstreaming in Early Childhood Education*. Delmar Publishers, Albany, N.Y.
- Chandler, P.A. (1994). *A Place for Me: Including Children with Special Needs in Early Care and Education Settings*. National Association for the Education of Young Children, Washington, D.C.
- Dunst, C.J., C.M. Trivette, and A.G. Deal, Ed. (1994). *Supporting and Strengthening Families, Vol. 1*. Brookline Books, Cambridge, Massa.
- Wright, J.L. and D.D. Shade, Ed. (1994). *Young Children: Active Learners in a Technological Age*. National Association for the Education of Young Children, Washington, D.C.

More information

This publication is part of a series, Caring for Children with Special Needs. You may find other fact sheets in this series with helpful information. For the most current update of these fact sheets, check the National Network for Child Care website at:

<http://www.nncc.org>

- Caring for Children with Special Needs: Feeling Comfortable (overview)-NNCC-98-06
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: The Americans with Disabilities Act-NNCC-98-07
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: Allergies and Asthma-NNCC-98-08
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: Attention Deficit Disorder-NNCC-98-09
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: Challenging Behaviors-NNCC-98-10
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: Chronic Illnesses-NNCC-98-11
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: Developmental Delays-NNCC-98-12
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: Hearing Impairments-NNCC-98-13
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: HIV or AIDS-NNCC-98-14
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: Physical Differences and Impairments-NNCC-98-15
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: Seizure Disorders-NNCC-98-16
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: Speech and Language Problems-NNCC-98-17
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: Visual Impairments)-NNCC-98-18



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Also see the National Network for Child Care web site:

<http://www.nncc.org>

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