

# Adapting Activities & Materials for Young Children with Disabilities

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The ideas in this handout are provided as examples of only some of the potential adaptations that can be made to common materials and activities to insure that young children with disabilities can be included. The handout is organized by the learning centers or activities that are typical in early childhood programs. Not all the ideas listed in each learning center area are necessary or even helpful for all children with disabilities. It is important for you, the teacher of young children, to choose the adaptation that meets that need of the child, not the disability label. A variety of adaptations are provided so that you can have several ideas always ready to try when an adaptation is needed. The list of ideas is not meant to be exhaustive, so space has been provided for you to add your own favorite adaptation!

# Key Ideas

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To be successful in adapting activities and materials for young children with disabilities, the following Key Ideas must be considered.

**PLANNING FOR INCLUSION:** Inclusion is a term that refers to involving young children with disabilities and their families in all activities that are typical for children of that age. Inclusion is a value that says that all children belong, regardless of their abilities, gender, race, or ethnic background. When including young children in typical early childhood settings, some planning will be needed to make sure it is successful for everyone. While you may not be able to predict every adaptation needed, work as a team with the family to plan for as many of the necessary adaptations as possible. Develop your plan by reviewing a typical day and identifying any potential times when adaptations might make an activity more successful. Review your adaptation plan after you have had an opportunity to observe the child in that activity.

**ONLY AS SPECIAL AS NEEDED:** One of the keys to adapting activities for young children with disabilities is to make the materials or activity only as special as needed. Materials for young children with disabilities don't have to come from special catalogs or cost a lot of money. Often regular age-appropriate toys can be used with little or no adaptations. Use your own expertise and common sense!

**YOU'RE NOT IN IT ALONE:** Adapting materials involves a lot of creative thinking and is often easier when a team of people brainstorm ideas together. More people with more expertise provides more ideas! Talk to other teachers, therapists, or specialists working with the child and find out what ideas they have. The best resource for adaptation ideas is the child's family. The family can provide years of experience and

knowledge about their child. They may have already found the adaptation answer!

**INDIVIDUALIZATION:** Not all children with same disability label need the same adaptations. Children who have the same label are usually more different than they are alike. Therefore, it is important to think of adaptations for a particular child, not a disability. Have a number of different ideas available so that you always have a new idea.

## **DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE**

**PRACTICE:** One key characteristic of a quality early childhood program is a curriculum that is based on developmentally appropriate practice. A developmentally appropriate curriculum focuses on the learning characteristics of children at different developmental levels but individualizes for the unique interests, strengths and personalities of the child. When young children with disabilities are included in programs that use a developmentally appropriate approach, the types of individualizations that are already used for young children without disabilities must just be extended to meet the needs of all children.

**PARTIAL PARTICIPATION:** Partial participation refers to involving a child in an activity even if he can not perform all the steps of the activity. A child is partially participating in dressing if she pulls the shirt on over her head, but needs help to put on the sleeves. Some children with disabilities may not be able to do all the steps of an activity that their typically developing peers can do. However, the child with disabilities should still be involved in as much of the activity as possible. Identify what parts of that activity the child can do, and then develop adaptations or teaching strategies for the other parts of the activity.

# General Good Teaching Ideas

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The following list provides ideas that are good strategies for using with all kids. The list is not meant to be exhaustive. Add teaching strategies and ideas that have been successful for you.

- Try to allow the children choices as much as possible. This will help them develop a sense of control over their world and good communication skills. However, do not give a choice that is not really an option. Especially for young children who are just developing communication skills, you must be prepared to comply with all choices you give! For example, coming in or not coming in from outdoor play may not be a choice provided to the child. However, the child may choose what toy to play with once he is inside.
- Accept alternative ways to communicate desires and choices. As adults, we all use a variety of gestures, noises, and facial expressions, along with words to communicate. Allow children to use a variety of communication strategies.
- Create needs for communication throughout the day.
- The materials that are available for each activity should meet the needs of children with a range of developmental levels. There is a range of development in all children at the same chronological age. Make sure you plan for the range of developmental needs in each activity.
- Make the best use of natural opportunities for learning. For example, one opportunity to teach colors may occur at snack time when you match the red plate with the red cup. Plan how to incorporate individual goal and objectives into ongoing activities.
- Labeling objects and areas in the room can provide a good start for early literacy skills. In addition to written words, think about using pictures or even textures as adaptations for children with special needs.
- Provide breaks from the noise and activity of the group as needed for individual children. Breaks to a quiet area can often allow a child to regroup if the stimulation of the group is too intense.
- Allow for many opportunities for repetition and practice. All children use repetition and practice to learn about the world.
- Provide opportunities for cooperative learning activities across all areas. Provide opportunities for shared materials, games to play with a friend, etc.

# Activity Adaptations

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## TRANSITION TIMES:

- Make sure that there are clear paths between activity areas for children who may have difficulty moving from one place to another.
- Tape down edges of rugs so that little feet, wheelchairs or crutches don't get caught on the edges.
- To make transition time easier for children who need to be in adapted chairs, place the chair on platform with wheels or in wagon. Make sure that the chair is safely attached to the platform or wagon before moving it.
- Have tactile path between areas for children who have difficulty seeing their way from one area to another. The tactile path may be a bookcase or wall that is trailed, or a different floor covering that is used to indicate the borders of an area.
- Allow children who move slowly the opportunity to leave an area first in order to minimize moving time and obstacles.
- Use a cue or cues to indicate the time to transition to another area. The cues used should be adapted to the needs of the individual children. Don't be afraid to use combinations of cues. Playing a bell, musical instrument, or singing a clean-up song might be helpful for children who need an auditory cue. Turning the lights on and off or developing a picture cue for transition time might be a cue for child who needs a visual cue.

- Enhance the verbal cues used to tell children where to go next. Use gestures, pictures, or objects for children who need more than just speech. Use natural cues if possible, ("Its by the gerbils — listen for noise!")
- Small baskets on walkers or wheel chairs or a backpacks or fanny packs can help children get materials from one activity to another
- Children who need help with walking or balance can move to a new area by using push toy or riding toy.
- To help children assist with clean-up mark the shelf areas where materials are kept. Children with difficulty seeing may need to have the correct area outlined in with dark line markings, outlined with high contrast materials (bright yellow on a dark shelf), or marked with different textures.
- Other Adaptations I Like:



## BLOCKS

- Make sure there is a way for the child to be on the same level as the other children. If a child needs assistance in sitting on the floor to play with blocks, have adapted equipment available. Cut the legs off of a chair with arms and a high back. Use a bean bag chair that can be molded to the child's needs. Have all children build with blocks on a table if no floor seating is available.
- Mark off the block area with bright tape or a texture to mark boundaries of the block area. This adaptation may be helpful for children who have difficulty seeing or staying in the boundaries without enhanced cues.
- Attach Velcro to blocks to help them stay together easily.
- Use a variety of types of blocks to match the physical needs of each child. Experiment with different types of blocks to find out what properties they have. Some blocks are easier to stack, some are easier to grab, some are light, some are heavy, some make noise, etc. Examples of different blocks are bristle blocks, magnetic blocks or marbles, blocks that fasten together using snaps, cloth blocks, or covered shoe boxes. Collect a variety.
- Other Adaptations I Like:

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## HOUSEKEEPING CORNER

- Have clothing available that uses a variety of fasteners, some easy, others more difficult.

- Make sure that all areas (table & chairs, counters, shelves, etc) can be reached by a child in a wheelchair or by a child who may have difficulty reaching long distances.
- Include dolls with disabilities as part of the family of dolls available.
- Include equipment related to disabilities in the dress-up area. Some equipment might include glasses, canes, braces, hearing aides, or wheelchairs. The equipment can be pretend or made from old or outgrown equipment. Make sure equipment is safe.
- Other Adaptations I Like:



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## TABLE TOYS

- Most electric or battery operated toys can be modified to be activated by a switch. Find or make simple switches that allow for a variety of ways to access these types of toys.
- Make sure that toys won't move across table if the child can not stabilize it. Use velcro, double-backed tape, a C-clamp to hold the toy to the table.
- Place the toy in a shallow tray on the table to help keep all the pieces together and define that play area.
- Investigate that toys already at the toy store!

- If children have difficulty holding small toys, help them to grasp the toys better by building up handles with sponge hair curlers or pipe insulation, or by attaching the handle to the hand using a velcro strap.
- Look for puzzles with knobs or handles. Adapt your favorite puzzles with knobs from the hardware store.
- Other Adaptations I Like:

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## ART

- When using paint brushes, adapt handles to make them easier to grasp. Handles may be lengthened, shortened, built up with pipe insulation, attached to the hand using a velcro strap, or attached to a glove with velcro on the palm.
- Experiment with using other materials in painting projects that may be easier to grasp. Examples include: raw potatoes, sponges, squeeze paints, drinking straws to blow paint, or spin art with a switch adaptation. Line a shallow bucket with art paper and place a marble dipped in paint in the bucket. Tip the bucket to make the marble “paint” the paper.
- Tape drawing paper to table if more stability is needed. On an easel, use tape or paper clips to hold on to surface.
- Use large sized or finger tip crayons for children who have difficulty holding on to small crayons.

- Markers make thick lines and need less pressure than crayons. They may be a good adaptation for children who may not see thin crayon lines or who can not press hard enough with crayons.

- Tie markers or brushes to table or easel. This will allow children who have difficulty getting down to the floor to be more independent in picking up dropped materials.



- Add food flavorings or scents to home made Playdough. This will enhance the fun for children who may not see the clay.



- Other Adaptations I Like:

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## SAND & WATER

- Make sure children are able to access the sand and water tables. It is important for children to be able to reach a wide area of the table. Raise the table so that children in wheelchairs can fit under the table. Make sure all adaptations to the table are stable.
- Adapt the position of the table in order to meet the needs of a variety of children. Experiment with the height of the table so that it is on the floor, at chair height or for standing. Make sure adapted equipment for standing or sitting at the table is available for children who need the assistance.

- If no table is available or if it can not be adapted easily, make individual containers of water or sand using small bins or buckets. Pair children together to play in a container that may be placed on a wheelchair tray.
- Make sure the toys in the sand/water table fit a range of developmental needs. Have a range of simple to complex pouring, sifting, and squeezing toys.
- Attach a switch to a small fan that can be operated by a child who has difficulty manipulating toys. His friends can use the fan to help blow soap bubbles, streamers, or pin wheels.
- Use a variety of textures in the table. Some examples might include dried beans, rice, shaving cream, gelatin, or mud!
- Other Adaptations I Like:

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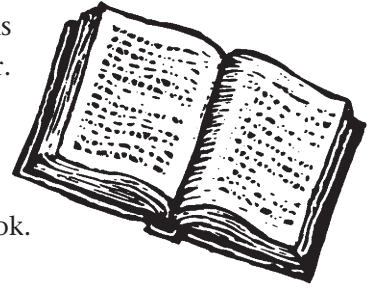


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## **LIBRARY**

- Identify a variety of ways that children can respond during story time. Some can respond by speaking, pointing to pictures, holding items discussed in the story, turning pages, etc.
- Use story cassette tapes. Use a tape player with large buttons or adapt it to a large switch. Color code or use textures to identify “play” and “stop” buttons.

- Include braille books in the library corner. Braille each page of the story onto clear, heavy label tape. Add to the book.



- Include a variety of books about children with disabilities in the library area.
- Include books that use sign language to communicate the story.
- Make a class talk book. This is a photo album that includes pictures, objects or pieces of materials that are related to day's activities. This will allow children with little speech to talk about their day by pointing to the objects. It also provides children who may have difficulty remembering with clues about what happened during the day. Words can be added so that it is expanded to an early literacy activity.
- Adapt a switch to slide projector. Take slides of each page of a story book. A child who is unable to turn pages can use the switch to advance the story during story time.
- For children who have difficulty turning pages, place tabs on each page. Attach a small piece of foam to each page so there is more room to slip in a finger and turn pages.
- Other Adaptations I Like:

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## RESOURCES

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