

7 Ways to Include Students in Physical Education

Does your child participate in physical education at school? What about sports?

The ones that need it most receive it less – Studies have found that special education students are less likely to be enrolled in physical education compared to their general education peers. Separate studies have also found that special education students are more likely to develop childhood obesity and related health conditions compared to their general education peers. Additionally, special education students often have delays in gross motor skills due to conditions such as hypotonia or dyspraxia. But physical therapy is usually only 1 to 2 hours per week, if it is offered at all.

Then there's the problem of delayed social skills – how does a student participate in a team activity when social nuances are confusing? These are the students who keep the bench warm during gym class. In other words, the students who could benefit from physical education the most end up with minimal participation...but it doesn't have to be that way.

How to Include a Student with Special Needs in Physical Education – Physical education teachers around the world are coming up with new ways to include all students and get everyone moving. Here are seven everyday challenges and solutions in physical education today, all of which can be written into a student's IEP.

1. **Sensory Integration:** things such as loud music and fluorescent lights in a gym can be major barriers to students with some types of neurological differences. Many students are also sensitive to bright sunlight outdoors and the sound of squeaking sneakers on the gym floor, making it difficult for physical education teachers to find an appropriate location for class.

Some of these issues can be addressed simply by turning the volume of music down or off, allowing the child to use soundproof headphones (indoors or outdoors), or sunglasses (indoors or outdoors). Schools may find other indoor lighting options that are more cost-effective, taking advantage of green energy incentives for LED light bulbs or simply shutting off some lights are relying more on natural lighting.

2. **Behavior:** Behavior is always a concern in physical education classes, where there's plenty of movement and incidents can happen in rapid succession. The use of Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) can be a powerful tool for preventing negative behaviors and increasing healthy interactions. The method may be summarized as "Prevent, Teach, Reinforce." Behavioral expectations are explained from the beginning with supports such as picture schedules. Then the class material is taught through positive interactions, and the lesson is reinforced by referring back to behavioral expectations and evaluating progress. For example, the physical education teacher can manage the class by writing out the schedule on a board in the gym. Students will know the order of the warm-up exercises and exactly how many minutes each segment of the class will take.
3. **Class Size:** In some school districts, physical education classes are becoming larger and larger due to budget constraints. For example, in some public schools, a single physical education class may have 180 students co-taught by 2 physical education teachers. In a class this size, it can take more than 10 minutes of class time just to take attendance and make sure each student has a ball.

Peer-to-peer support groups can work together in class to ensure full inclusion. For example, if a student is having trouble with his/her gym locker, another student could offer to share their locker, or assist the child with opening theirs. When the class separates into teams, 4 or 5 other students could help to make sure that the child understands the rules and their role on the team.

4. **Team Building:** Physical Education is the perfect opportunity for team building exercises. Instead of competitive games, the class can focus on creative games that only succeed when a whole team works together.



5. **Professional Development:** Many teachers of physical education complain about a lack of professional development opportunities. Scheduling is a problem because of coaching duties before and after school, and most continuing education programs are geared toward teachers of academic subjects.

An increasing number of teacher certification programs offer classes in Adaptive Physical Education. The Adaptive Physical Education National Standards (APENS) organization promotes teacher certification in 15 standards for physical education, and its goal is to place a nationally certified Adapted Physical Educator (CAPE) within every school district in the USA. Understanding even just a few of these standards can go a long way toward inclusion in physical education.

Attending an IEP is another way for physical education teachers to become involved in the process of inclusion. By parents, teachers and therapists working together, it is possible to develop goals that fit the physical education curriculum and are tailored to a student's unique needs. The team-based approach isn't just for students!

6. **Accessibility:** In 2010, the US Department of Education made recommendations to increase accessibility in physical education classes. Hard surfaces such as concrete and asphalt may be dangerous for individuals with dyspraxia, and softer surfaces such as sand or wood chips make it difficult to maneuver a wheelchair. Gym surfaces and outdoor mats are one way to make physical education more accessible. Another way is to level the playing field by having the whole class play a game such as sitting volleyball or scooter soccer.
7. **Alternatives:** In some cases, enrollment in a physical education class is not feasible. But it is still possible to incorporate physical activity and healthy lifestyle habits into a special education curriculum:
- take frequent "movement breaks" by going for a walk, learning to jump rope or spending 10 minutes on a playground
 - develop a daily 15 minute workout routine
 - get permission to use the school's weightlifting room – sometimes curiosity about various machines is enough to jump-start an individualized exercise program
 - follow through on the student's interest in a specific sport, such as tennis or gymnastics, and develop a fitness routine around that
 - follow through on a student's interest in fitness games on Kinect or Wii

It has been demonstrated again and again that physical education enhances cognitive function and academic performance. Social skills and collaborative teamwork are also benefits of a balanced physical education program. So let's make physical education inclusive & accessible to all students so that they can learn the life lessons that can't be taught in a traditional classroom.



The contents of this publication were developed under a grant from the US Department of Education, H328M150022 (PATH), H328M150023 (PEN), & H328M150024 (TEAM). However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the US Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.



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