

Considerations for Children with Disabilities

One goal of *I Am Moving, I Am Learning* is for all children in a class or program to enjoy and be successful in structured physical activities. This includes young children who may have identified or suspected disabilities. As you individualize *I Am Moving, I Am Learning* approaches for your children with disabilities, it may be helpful to start by referring to the child's IEP or IFSP for guidance. The instructional approaches recommended in a child's plan should be useful in all parts of a child's day, including active play. Furthermore, using music and rhythmic movement activity is often an ideal way to work on IEP/IFSP goals in language, learning and coordination.



The large majority of children in Head Start who have IEPs need support in **speech and language development**. Fortunately, active play is an area where many of these children can be as successful as their peers. Commonly recommended strategies for children with speech or language delays include:

- ✓ get a child's full attention and make eye contact when giving new instructions
- ✓ give one direction at a time, speaking clearly
- ✓ use verbal prompts in new activities, e.g. "around the chair, around the chair" and encourage a child to repeat your prompt; "you say it: 'around the chair, around the chair.'"
- ✓ use visual cues together with verbal cues:
 - say "Stop" and pair it with a toy stop sign or a homemade red light
 - show what "jump two times" means while you're saying it or counting it

The above strategies are also likely to be effective with children who have developmental delays that affect their learning. Additionally, children with **cognitive delays** may be more successful if you:

- ✓ give extra time to understand a direction or request
- ✓ simplify an activity by breaking it down into small steps
- ✓ allow for multiple repetitions of an activity
- ✓ use classmates as buddies or partners

If you have a child with **autism** in your group, or a child who has great difficulty with communicating or interacting with others, any of the strategies noted above may be helpful. It's also useful to consider whether the child is usually *highly sensitive* to noise, light, movement and touch, or under-responsive to those sensations. Remember that children with autism really like routines, when they know what will happen next, and they often don't imitate others' actions like other children do. When you are leading group physical activities that include children with autism:

- ✓ remove unnecessary or excessive stimuli for children with high sensitivity
- ✓ help children for transitions within and activity and between activities
- ✓ use visual cues like pictures or symbols to give instructions or explain a sequence of activity
- ✓ **have a plan for the child to "opt out" when the environment becomes too stressful**

Some children have **physical challenges** like cerebral palsy, spina bifida, or other conditions that interfere with their ability to move around on their own or control their arms and hands. For these children, it's best to consult with the physical therapist and/or occupational therapist regularly to talk about modifications, inclusion strategies and any precautions that may be necessary. Be sure to ask if special "adaptive" equipment would be appropriate. For full participation, some children with movement problems will benefit when you:

- ✓ allow adequate space and access in the environment
- ✓ modify the rules - instead of "galloping with her feet, Taylor gallops with her hands on her lap"
- ✓ provide direct assistance for part of an activity
- ✓ regularly plan activities that work for all children

Children with **hearing loss** may benefit from the same strategies you use with children who have speech and language delays. Be sure to position a child with hearing problems where he can see the leader and the other children. If your group includes a child with **blindness or low vision**, make sure your area is well-lighted, and that any materials are bright and colorful. Include materials like balls or bean bags that have interesting textures or materials. Boundaries in movement areas can be marked with high-contrast tape, another strategy that is helpful for all your children!





Activities for All Key Concepts, Ah-has, and IMILisms

Key Concepts:

- Physical activity is important for everyone, including children with physical disabilities
- Culture can impact participation style as well as how play and physical activity are revered in a culture
- It is important for educators to know the individual child and families, and not to make sweeping generalizations
- IEPs, parents/caregivers, and other professionals (e.g., PT, SLP) are vital to your success when working with children with disabilities

Ah-has:

- Adaptations for disabilities should be individualized and made only when necessary; children can progress past their need for certain types of adaptations/accommodations
- Focus on ability not disability
- Adapting for disability and culture is easy and **does not** require a lot of expense or special equipment; it does require thought and planning
- Asking a child to participate in a way that goes against what they are being taught at home (from a cultural standpoint) can cause unexpected behavior and acting out in the classroom. Ex: a child from a certain culture who does not feel it is appropriate to be the center of attention may cry or act out when put in the center of a circle for a game or activity.

IMILisms:

- Design activities and experiences that allow children to have opportunities for MVPA that meet their individual needs
- It is OK to have children participating at different levels within the same group and activity
- When adapting, focus on skills and strengths that will benefit the child. For example, if you are working with a child who uses a wheelchair, encourage them to work on upper body and core strengthening activities and chair maneuvering skills when possible in the context of an activity. All of these will aid the child in daily living skills.
- Ask parents and caregivers to share games and activities from their culture for you to use in the classroom and outdoors