

The Benefits of Sport Activities for Children with Special Needs

Sports, especially fundamental and movement education based sports like gymnastics, provide tremendous benefits for children with special needs. Physical education programs can considerably improve the lifestyle of a disabled child and are highly recommended. These programs may help control obesity, promote activeness, increase a child's self-image and social skills, and increase motivation. **The physical activity along with support, rewards, and interaction can, among other benefits, be very helpful to these children and their families.**

Physical Improvements - Children suffering from cognitive disabilities are most likely going to suffer from physical impairments as well. These children have substantial problems with motor skills in areas such as hopping, skipping, and jumping. Involvement in gymnastics can help these individuals develop fundamental motor and physical fitness skills.

Self-Esteem - Developing a sense of self-esteem and confidence is an extremely important part of special education. These children need to be involved in environments where they feel that they are contributing successfully to a group. Their abilities in all other skill areas will improve as a result of a positive self-image and confidence.

Cognitive Benefits - The hands-on aspect of sports leads to cognitive skill improvement in children with disabilities and allows them to discover and access strengths that cannot be challenged in the traditional classroom setting. The inherent structure of sport, with its organization and rules, can be used as a learning tool for introducing and practicing self-regulation and decision making skills. Additionally, children can learn verbal communication and interaction with peers through involvement in sport.

Disabilities may include:

- ADD/ADHD
- Autism Spectrum Disorders
- Blind/Vision Impaired
- Cerebral Palsy
- Deaf/Hearing Impaired
- Developmental Disabilities/Mental Retardation
- Downs Syndrome
- Epilepsy
- Feeding Issues
- Mitochondrial Disorders
- Sensory Integration Disorder
- Speech Disorders
- Spina Bifida

Gymnastics clubs may be a tremendous resource for children with disabilities. However, special safety considerations are important to keep in mind.

- Think about: How you could change the activity to suit the student? Can the activity be adapted or modified to ensure safety and success?
- Carefully review class registration forms regarding the special needs and/or medical conditions of a child. This will allow teachers to place the children in the right classes and provide creative teaching from the beginning.

- If a child has a physical handicap, it is helpful to know if he/she is in physical therapy. Teachers could work with the physical therapist to coordinate programs for the child as well as understand any prohibitive movements.
- If the student requires assistance from an outside individual such as a parent or therapist in order to stay safe in class, the individuals should be informed of the gym's safety rules for themselves and the child. The outside individual should sign a statement indicating their compliance with the gym's safety rules.

Many clubs throughout the country offer gymnastics classes and activities for children with special needs. [Gymcats Gymnastics](#) in Henderson, NV utilizes a unique approach, providing positive community impact, to special needs gymnastics activities – just one of the numerous success stories. [[click for full Gymcats article](#)]

Links to Additional Resources:

- [Special Olympics: Young Athlete Program](#)
- [Adapted Physical Education Resource Manual \(AAHPERD\)](#)
- [Disability Fact Sheet \(PE Central\)](#)
- [Teaching, Responding & Communicating Inclusive Physical Education](#)

Sources (all sources were viewed 10/2008):

1. [University of Michigan: Special Education and Sports](#)
2. [Children with Special Needs](#)
3. [About.com: Special Needs](#)
4. [Center for Disease Control: National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities](#)