SPECIAL PEOPLE IN OUR GYMS:
UNDERSTANDING SPECIAL NEEDS

This past summer, I was asked to present at USA Gymnastics National Congress on the topic of special needs. It is a topic close to my heart. So, I was thrilled to have the opportunity to share with my fellow coaches on the topic.

Presentation in hand, PowerPoint loaded and ready to go, I was about to start my planned presentation when a coach walked up to me to ask me a quick question she specifically wanted addressed. I did my best to answer quickly so I could get started with my presentation. Another coach joined the conversation, and then, before I knew it, as other coaches began to join the conversation there was a full-blown conversation discussion going on among all of us with additional questions and topics being addressed within the conversation.

As I tried to bring the conversation back around to get my presentation started, I realized that the coaches in attendance seemed to have specific issues and questions they wanted me to address. So, I went to plan B, and we ended up scrapping my prepared presentation and having an open discussion covering a wide range of questions regarding special needs. It was time well-spent, and we had a very good discussion. I’m glad we did it. In the interest of sharing the information I had previously planned to present, however, I am condensing my lecture material into this article.

SO...WHY ME?: THE FEAR

Too often, we allow our prejudices and fears to limit us. I can’t begin to count the number of times I have heard the same questions from coaches all over the country:

“’I’m not a doctor.”

“I’m not an Occupational Therapist.”

“I don’t know how to work with children with special needs.”

“I’m afraid I will hurt them.”

“I don’t have the patience.”

The best advice regarding fear I have ever heard came from Robin Pearson. She often says, “Attitude trumps skill.” To add to that statement, the best thing to remember is that children who live with special needs are NORMAL children. They want the same things that any other child wants. They want to have fun. They seek acceptance, community, love and success.

As long as there is no medical reason for a child to be prohibited from participation, a kiddo living with special needs can greatly benefit from participation in our sport. If there is concern as to whether or not it is safe for a child to participate, ask for a doctor’s
note to keep on file. With a few exceptions like those who have Down's Syndrome and are positive for atlantoaxial subluxation, most kids can participate with a little assistance and adaptation of activities. Remaining aware if a child is seizure prone is also important. Beam activities for seizure-prone children must be adapted to Velcro beams or floor beams with heavy spotting.

**SO, WHAT DO WE DO?**

Do we mainstream these children? Do we establish separate classes? Do we work one-on-one with children with special needs? The answer to all of these questions is, "YES!" Working with special needs requires flexibility. The goal should ALWAYS be to mainstream. Still, each child is different. Each disability is different. So, we create classes that fit the needs of the child to the best of our ability. Some may need time working one-on-one, while others may be completely ready to mainstream right away. Adding a "floater coach" to a class with children who are learning to mainstream is a good idea during the transitional period. Our goal is to help children to gain as much independence and success as possible.

It is important for children to have peer modeling. It is especially important for children who are on the Autism Spectrum. If we only allow children to participate in "special needs classes," they learn behaviors from their peers that may not be desired behaviors as they integrate into society. Providing opportunity for them to interact with their neuro-typical peers, helps them to learn to mimic socially acceptable and appropriate behaviors instead.

Further, mainstreaming not only benefits the special needs population, but also the neuro-typical population. Their neuro-typical peers gain through reciprocal nourishment as they learn compassion, acceptance and understanding. As neuro-typical children have the opportunities to interact with others who may be a little different than themselves, they gain valuable understanding.

**SO...WHERE DO I START??**

Start small, and grow your comfort levels. Study, study, study. The more understanding gained regarding each disability, the easier it becomes to figure out lesson planning and picking out beneficial activities. Study research articles, medical journals, websites. Talk to parents, therapists, doctors and teachers. They all have invaluable insights. Learn as much as you can about the disability with which you will be working. Understanding the causes and effects provides guidance in activities.

When you are ready to start a special needs program, let the community know. Let the school districts know. They may have students who would be interested in extra-curricular activities. Contact local hospital systems and let the occupational therapy, physical therapy, neurology, psychiatry and psychology departments know. Very often they have patients who can benefit from afterschool activities like gymnastics, and they may refer them. Special needs support groups for parents are also great groups to contact.

**LESSON PLANNING**

One of the frequently asked questions is, “How do I lesson plan for special needs?” As you get started, remember, fundamental movement is important for EVERYONE. One of the simplest ways to begin is by using a basic preschool curriculum and adapting activities to benefit the children involved in the class. Starting out, it is a perfectly viable plan to begin with obstacle courses similar to those used in preschool gymnastics, adding vestibular activities like swinging and rocking and proprioceptive activities like jumping or body slamming mats as stations within the obstacle course. Make sure that fundamental movement like belly crawling, knee crawling, and activities encouraging the crossing of the midline are included. All of these are incredibly important in human development.

**ACTIVITIES TO INCORPORATE**

**GROSS MOTOR MOVEMENTS**

- Running
- Jumping
- Galloping
- Animal movements:
**Bilateral work**, like bear-walking and climbing a ladder on the floor or walking across floor p-bars.

**Lateral movements**: Monkey walking

**Spider walking through a resi-pit canyon**

**Five Little Monkeys**

**Swinging, Rocking & Spinning**

Swinging on therapeutic swings or rope swings will help gain vestibular input. It is often calming and helps the child to become “centered” and ready for learning.

Using a large therapeutic ball and rocking back and forth can also give the same effect.

Try laying on the ball, in a prone position and rocking back and forth while singing a simple song.

If a child has to wait a turn, let them sit on a ball. This helps develop core stabilization.

Before sitting down, spin five times — this engages the corpus callosum and communication between the two hemispheres, engages the vestibular apparatus, and wakes the brain.

**Impact Activities**

After swinging, add impact activities or activities that give input from the muscles and joints for the proprioceptive drills.

- Trampoline
- Pressure point warm-ups
- Bouncing on a ball or hippity hop
- Bouncing on a springboard
- Singing songs with clapping
- Chewing on hard candy
- Falling on mats
- Knock over a cheese mat, then roll.

**Core-Body & Strengthening Activities**

- Towel rides
- Unstable surfaces
- Trampoline
- Ball rocking
- Wobble boards
- Balance on one foot (may need to be supported). This engages many skills (especially in ADHD) They are concentrating on instructions along with physical stimulation.
- Floor beams configured like teeter-totters
- Shoulder and upper body strengthening activities: this helps the fine motor skills in the hands for handwriting.

- Grasping and releasing activities like playing catch
- Grip balls
- Low weight lifts in Super Man
- Chin-ups
- Support work

**Include Textures**

Textures not only give sensory stimulus, but including textures will also help kids who have tactile defensiveness to become more comfortable with touch.

- Furry bear paws
- Play-dough
- Scrubbers
- Brushes

**Problem Solving & Sequencing Activities**

- Climbing across a path of unstable mat surfaces to problem solve movement.
- Wooden puzzles
- Lay down sequential cards out of order and ask the children to put them back into the correct sequence.
- Have students perform a sequence of jumps on the trampoline.
- Add-on games to build the sequence.

**Bilateral Work**

Activities that force the two sides of the brain to communicate and coordinate:

- Activities that force crossing the mid-line, using opposition
- Bear Walks for oppositional movement
- Slinkies
• Buttons and Snaps
• Shaking Hands
• Velcro puzzles that force the children to use their left hand to place a piece of the puzzle on the right side of the picture, or the right hand to place a piece of the puzzle onto the left side of the picture.
• Catching a swinging ball with opposite hands, and then both hands.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND FOR STUDENTS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

• Remember, children with ASD’s are often very smart. They learn to “play the system.”
• Provide purpose for movement and scoring systems.
• Provide movement “busy-stations” or fidget stations in case they have to wait their turns.
• Offer classes during the quiet times in the gym so that the amount of stimulus is lowered, making it easier for the kids to process all of the information they are receiving.
• Watch the compulsive behaviors and use them to get what you want (look for flight patterns).
• Keep class very structured and keep instruction very specific.
• Give time warnings.
• Force eye contact through activity.
• Have calming activities ready.
• Remain patient.
• Maintain accountability.
• Work on listening skills; be specific, stand on one foot with arms crossed while listening. This helps them locate themselves, provides stimulation and self regulation.
• Allow kids to touch each other

• Allow stimming, just redirect it to socially acceptable activities
• Use their favorite catch phrases to get their attention. Calling their names does not always work.
• For those who need space, rock n roll, stand up High-5
• For those who need more pressure, give bear hugs
• Teach other students that we all need tools to learn. Ie. A mat to climb on, or a target for a landing spot.
• Ask parents what reward systems they use. Stay consistent.
• Provide safe zones or signals.
• Use their behaviors. If they push: “I see you need to push, go do 10 wall push-ups.” “I see you need to run... You can run on my dot.”

OVERSTIMULATION & MELTDOWNS: CIRCUMVENT THE PROBLEM BEFORE IT HAPPENS

The gym environment can be incredibly stimulating with all the noise and activity, the number of new people and expectations. For children who have difficulty with sensory integration, it can be overwhelming. There are activities that are helpful in alleviating the tension of overstimulation. Different children will respond positively to different activities. So,