

Adaptations for Children with Disabilities

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Teaching practices that support learning and development for children with disabilities are identified in the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework. This section of the Leaders Guide focuses on adaptations for children with disabilities and is intended to assist disabilities coordinators in improving services to these children and their families.

The following is an excerpt from the **Head Start Leader Guide to Positive Child Outcomes**.

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Adaptations for Children with Disabilities

The Head Start Program Performance Standards (2002) require that Head Start staff screen for possible developmental concerns that might require professional evaluation and intervention. When a child is identified by professionals as having a disability, which may include physical, cognitive, or social-emotional conditions as well as developmental delays, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is prepared that specifies goals and objectives. The IEP is comprehensive and may overlap with the categories of Domains. Teachers are especially concerned about supporting the learning and development of children with identified disabilities or special needs. Meeting the needs of individual children, especially those with IEPs, requires regular contact among professionals and close communication with parents.

Descriptions and examples of seven research-based types of modifications and adaptations that were developed for children with disabilities follow (Wolery & Wilburs 1994; Hemmeter et al. 2001; Sandall, Schwartz, & Joseph 2001; Sandall et al. 2002). These strategies center on ways to alter the environment, adapt materials, modify an activity, build on a child's preferences, use peer support, offer invisible support in the course of everyday events, and provide adult support in activities. These modifications offer Head Start teaching teams many different—and appropriate ways—to support the development and learning of individual children. Many of the teaching strategies described earlier in the *Guide* under the different Domains also promote individualization and support the development of children with disabilities.

Environmental Support: Altering the physical and social environment and the timing of activities to promote a child's participation, engagement, and learning. If a child—

- Has difficulty putting toys and equipment away during clean up—use pictures or symbols on shelves and containers. Make clean up a matching game.

- Has difficulty playing near peers—plan cooperative small group activities with engaging and highly motivating materials so that the child is in proximity with peers while engaging in fun activities such as creating murals and building cooperative block structures.
- Has no play partners—build friendships by seating the same peer next to the child every day at a planned activity such as small group or circle time.
- Does not participate in learning centers during free choice time—create a picture schedule for the child. The picture schedule can have pictures or symbols representing the various learning centers organized in a certain order; 1. art, 2. dramatic play, 3. blocks The child should be taught to refer to her schedule each time she finishes one activity and goes onto the next. She can also refer to her schedule when it is time for her to join an adult in a center in order to learn how to play there.
- Has difficulty making transitions—just before the transition provide the child with a picture or symbol representing the area or activity that the child should go to next. The child could even take the picture or symbol card with him to the next area.
- Quickly finishes with an activity and then has difficulty waiting for the next activity— open one or two quiet centers (such as the book area or computer) after the activity and allow her to leave the activity and go to one of the open quiet areas.

Materials Modification: Modifying materials so that the child can participate as independently as possible. If a child—

- Has difficulty standing at an art easel—lower the easel, give the child a chair, or use a table easel.
- Cannot reach the pedals of a tricycle with her feet—tape wooden blocks on to the pedals.
- Cannot reach the ground sitting in a regular child-size chair—place a stool under the table so that he can rest his feet on it and stabilize his body. This stability helps children more easily use their fine motor skills.
- Encounters difficulty using two hands to act on materials—stabilize materials using tape, velcro, nonskid backing (such as bath mat appliques), and clamps.
- Has difficulty with a skill or response required by a toy—modify the response. For example, if a child has difficulty turning the pages of a book, glue small pieces of sponge or styrofoam to each page; this will separate each page, making it simpler to turn the page.
- Does not choose the art center because actions such as gluing and pasting are still too difficult or unsettling—use contact paper or other sticky paper as the backing for collages. The child only has to put things on the paper.
- Has a hard time grasping markers and paint brushes—add a piece of foam around the markers and paint brushes to make them easier to hold.
- Has difficulty cutting on a line—broaden the line with a thick marker. Or, go over the line with glue—allowing enough time before art for the glue to dry. This raised surface will allow the child to get extra sensory feedback while her scissors rub against the dry glue.
- Shows minimal interest in the wooden blocks—wrap some of the blocks with colorful, shiny paper.
- Is not yet interested in books—include photograph albums with pictures of the children. Make photograph albums of field trips, class activities, and the child's special interests.

Modifying the Activity: Simplifying a complicated task by breaking it into smaller parts or reducing the number of steps. If a child—

- Is easily distracted when playing with manipulative toys such as puzzles, beads, and such—hand the pieces to the child one by one. Gradually increase the number of pieces the child has at one time.

- Is overwhelmed by activities such as cooking projects, craft projects, and table games, and is rarely successful—break down the activity into its parts. Describe the steps in clear terms, "First we do (x) then we do (y)." Draw pictures of steps to make it even clearer.
- Has difficulty understanding stories—use objects or flannel board pieces that represent characters or objects in the story. The child may make connections between the physical objects.
- Has a long walk from the car or bus to the classroom, and then dawdles, complains, and sometimes stops and drops to the floor—put photos, posters, or other interesting displays at strategic points along the way. Encourage the child to go to the next spot and describe the achievement, "You got to the baby elephant picture—can you find the baby lion?"
- Has difficulty with projects that have multiple steps—prepare the activity with the individual child in mind. Some children may do the entire project. Others may receive projects that have been started and then they finish the last two or three steps. Consider extending the project over several days if children's interest will be maintained.

Using Child Preferences: Identifying and integrating the child's preferences for materials or activities so that the child takes advantage of available opportunities. If a child—

- Has tantrums and tries to leave large group times such as morning circle—let the child hold a favorite, quiet toy such as a teddy bear or blanket. Divide the children into smaller groups so that it is easier for individual children to stay focused and participate.
- Has difficulty making transitions from one area or activity to the next—allow him to carry a favorite toy from one activity to the next. Alert the child that transition time is approaching and describe what will happen next.
- Does not come readily to circle time or other large group activities—begin large group time with a favorite activity such as blowing bubbles or singing that child's favorite song.
- Has difficulty engaging in new activities or learning centers or stays with one activity only—incorporate the child's favorite toy into the learning center that she rarely goes to. For example, if the child loves cars but never goes to the water table area, create a "car wash" in that area.

Peer Support: Utilizing peers to increase a child's participation. If a child—

- Does not know how to select an activity or game from the computer menu—pair the child with another child who is familiar with operating the computer. Let the peer show the other how to select an activity from the computer menu.
- Is watching two children play and seems to want to join them—ask the two children to invite the other to join them. Give them some tips, verbal and non-verbal, on how the third child might be included.
- Does not know when and where to line up during the transition to the playground— pair the child with another child who knows the routine and follows directions. Ask the children to find their partner and hold their partner's hand when lining up.
- Is learning to use English words or sign language to request food items at snack or mealtime—have another child hold the requested food (such as a plate of crackers). The target child will need to communicate with the friend which will stimulate language production.

Invisible Support: Purposefully arranging naturally occurring events within an activity. If a child—

- Is just learning to pour from a pitcher—let other children pour first so that the pitcher is not too full or just fill the pitcher halfway.

- Is a reluctant talker during group activities—give the child a turn to talk after another child who is particularly talkative. This gives the reluctant child ideas about what to say.
- Needs more practice on a particular gross motor skill such as walking on the balance beam—incorporate this skill into an obstacle course. Put a popular, fun, or noisy activity after the more difficult one. For example, let the children hit a gong after they walk across the balance beam.
- Has difficulty staying focused during small group activities—have him sit in such a way that distractions are minimized, such as away from the window or door or next to quieter children.

Adult Support: An adult intervening or joining the activity to support the child's level of participation. If a child—

- Repeats the same play actions over and over without making any changes, use adult support. For example, a child at the sand table dumps and fills and dumps and fills without seeming to pay attention to the effects of his actions. Show the child another way to dump and fill by making small alterations in the way that the child currently plays, such as holding the container at various heights or dumping the sand through a funnel or short tube.
- Is not interested in books—have staff or a family member record a story and then encourage him to listen to the book on tape in the book area. The parents could also say a special hello to the child on the tape. If the child looks at the book while listening to the tape, the parent can include cues for when to turn the page or make special comments that connect the pictures or the story line to the child's life experiences. "Remember when we saw a truck like that on our street?" "Do you think the boy in the story likes ice cream as much as you do?"

Head Start Program Performance Standards (2002) require individuation for each child to benefit from the program. The first step in meeting all children's individual needs is a developmentally appropriate curriculum. When modifications and adaptations are made for exceptional children, they often represent well-known early childhood teaching practices. As the teaching team identifies appropriate short-term goals for individual children and makes the necessary adaptations to the educational program, they will be helping children progress toward the long-term goals—that is, the child outcomes specified in the Framework.

"Adaptations for Children with Disabilities." The Head Start Leaders Guide to Positive Child Outcomes. HHS/ACF/ACYF/HSB. 2003. English.

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