



Complex Child E-Magazine

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Special Recreation is About Fun! Thoughts from an Adapted Recreation Coordinator by Julie Gallagher

I thought I would start out this article with the definition of recreation, but there really isn't one that makes me go, "Yeah, that's what I do," as an Adapted Recreation Coordinator. Webster's dictionary says that it is the refreshment of the strength and spirits after toil; amusement; diversion; sport; pastime. And yet it can be so much more.

Recreation should be an important part of everyone's life, if for no other reason than it's fun. You can learn a new skill, meet new people, and laugh. All of these things are important in today's busy lifestyles and I feel it's often even more important in the lives of people with disabilities. These families often have so much more going on. Maybe it is a fight with the school district to accommodate a child, more appointments than any one should have to keep track of, or maybe it is the ice left at the bottom of the ramp at the only entrance into the City Recreation Center. Where is the fun? Where can you meet people in real life who "get it?"

Adapted Recreation

There are several different types of recreation for people with disabilities. Some classes are specifically for people with disabilities, while others are inclusive classes that are designed for people with and without disabilities. In some cases, a person with a disability may be integrated into a regular class with accommodations.

I offer some of the first two on a regular basis and integrate people as I get requests. I have a fitness class specifically for adults with disabilities, and I only hire people with knowledge of multiple special needs so that the participants get the best workout possible. Examples of inclusive classes are my youth sports teams. They are for youth both with and without disabilities and the participants really learn a lot from each other. I just saw a young man without a disability last week who played basketball for several years in his preteen years. He now is 17 and works with some of his former teammates at a movie theater. What a great connection for him and them!

Our bread and butter is making accommodations for people with disabilities in classes organized by other recreation coordinators. Just this week, I have two kids with autism in a pottery class with no accommodations (LOVE that instructor), an eighth grader with

autism going on a ski trip with friends (his accommodation is to have a friend go for just the price of his lift ticket), and a gentleman with a hearing loss taking Hunter Education with an interpreter this weekend. Some of the accommodations I have done are trickier. I spent three weeks in an aerobics class with a woman who is blind so that she could learn the lingo. And I have two left feet.

Every community should have activities available to people with disabilities, even if they do not have an Adapted Recreation Coordinator on their staff. Parents are the most creative people I know and have great ideas about adapting classes to meet the needs of their kids. In talking with teens and adults with disabilities, they usually know exactly what they need to be successful in a class. For example, we now have two pottery wheels that are on hydraulics so that they can be used standing, in a wheelchair or from a stool/chair, because people with disabilities were active participants in the decision-making process.

A good resource to find physical activity opportunities for people with disabilities is the National Center on Physical Activity and Disability [www.ncpad.org]. A variety of organized sports can also be played through Special Olympics [www.specialolympics.org]. Most programs are unified, and individuals with and without disabilities are on the same team. Another great organization for kids is learning to ride a bike with Lose the Training Wheels [www.losethetrainingwheels.org]. There are so many organizations that provide activities for people with disabilities I could fill pages, but these are a few of my favorites.

The True Benefit of Adapted Recreation

Why do I do what I do? It has to be the smiles...the smiles on a kid's face as he finds success on the court or field after a hard day at school or therapies. There are the belly laughs from the child who was just zooming around the bases in her wheelchair. There is the sense of accomplishment in presenting a clay pot to a grandparent that a child made all by himself without anyone rushing him or giving him dirty looks because he took too long. Those are just a few of the reasons that I do what I do. Or maybe it is the adult with Multiple Sclerosis who tells me that after weight training, he still falls, but now he can get up by himself. I do it for the man with a hearing loss, so that he can go hunting and fishing with his buddies. I do it so that I have an excuse to play Red Light/Green Light with a group of six to nine-year-olds with disabilities after I spend two hours in a meeting about the renovation of the Recreation Center.

Life should be more about fun, shouldn't it?