
Personal Fitness for Students with Special Needs

by Christine Boyd Stopka

“Exercise and recreation are as necessary as reading. . . . I would rather say more necessary; as health is worth more than learning.”

Thomas Jefferson

The basic principles for improving personal fitness apply to everyone, regardless of abilities or limitations. In fact, it is strongly recommended that individuals with special needs engage regularly in personal fitness programs. The maintenance and improvement of muscular strength and endurance, cardiovascular fitness, flexibility and body composition are essential not only for general health and well being but also in order to minimize the deleterious effects of physically and mentally disabling conditions. Therefore, it is not only all right for individuals with special needs to exercise, it is necessary for individuals with special needs to exercise.

Abstinence from personal fitness endeavors, especially with the physically disabled, leads to joint contractures, muscle spasms and atrophy, weakness of muscles and connective tissue, pressure sores, a decrease in cardiovascular fitness, early osteoporotic disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels, and obesity just to name a few of the debilitating sequelae that occur from disuse. Now that we have established that individuals with special needs are not only allowed to exercise but need to exercise and that non-exercise can be detrimental, what is the next step?

The next step is to plan a high-quality, goal-directed, individualized personal fitness program. A good place to start would be to consider the five major developmental goals that are used by many physical fitness programs for both disabled and nondisabled individuals. These goals include organic, neuromuscular, interpretive, social, and emotional fitness. Total personal fitness is dependent upon the proper development of these five goals. Planning personal fitness programs around these general goals helps ensure that all individuals, regardless of ability or disability, will be on their way to looking their best and feeling their best. A few details about each goal are presented as follows.

Organic fitness emphasizes the health-related fitness components of flexibility, cardiovascular fitness, muscular endurance, muscular strength, and body composition. Proper development in these important areas of physical fitness helps to ensure the optimal functioning of the body systems and provides a foundation for skill development.

Neuromuscular fitness involves the harmonious functioning of the nervous and muscular systems to produce the desired movements. Developmental skills, motor skills, sports skills, and/or recreational skills are included in this area, depending upon the child's age, program goals, etc. An adequate organic fitness foundation is necessary to achieve optimal functioning of the neuromuscular skills.

Interpretive fitness involves the ability to apply knowledge and understanding to movement activities. Academic concepts can be learned and reinforced by good physical fitness

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programs. For example, even students with mental retardation can learn the basic techniques and principles necessary to improve the health-related components of physical fitness. Students with disabilities can be taught to exercise three times a week and can appreciate the difference between strength and flexibility as well as the difference between how they feel when they exercise regularly and how they feel when they do not exercise.

Social and emotional fitness address the ability of students to interact with others and themselves. For example, a well-designed personal fitness program can involve and even emphasize the cooperation of others through spotting at weight stations, partner calisthenics, and peer tutoring and support. Soon students discover that they can work together, learn from each other, have fun, and improve in their personal fitness goal areas. These experiences help them improve their self-concept and confidence. The students begin to feel more in control of their own lives. Personal feelings of pride and accomplishment abound as individual goals become fulfilled.

The areas of organic, neuromuscular, interpretive, social, and emotional development can provide a good starting point to design a good personal fitness program. All students, whether they are athletically gifted or athletically limited, can start from these five major goals and carry out an effective and individualized program in accordance with their specific needs, skills, limitations, and interests.

General examples of individualized program design might be where teachers of emotionally or behaviorally disabled students choose to emphasize the emotional and social objectives of these students' programs as they carry out their specific physical fitness activities. Teaching methods emphasizing generous doses of positive reinforcement, immediate and constructive feedback, skill challenges that are not overly difficult, and a highly structured, calm and consistent environment will help to ensure a successful experience for these students. Teachers of students with mental retardation could teach the same skills to them that they teach to other students, but they should teach these students at a slower pace, allowing for repetition and reinforcement. Teachers of physically disabled students would want to identify the specific components of physical fitness (strength, endurance, or flexibility) most needed and allow the students to develop these components as much as possible. All five goals are indicated for all students. The idea is to emphasize and prioritize each objective and its components in accordance with the individual needs, abilities, limitations, and interests of each student. This helps to ensure that the students' programs will address the appropriate content while being appropriately individualized. Figure 1 is an example of a fitness IEP (Individual Educational Plan) for a physically disabled student.

The more you understand the specific nature of the special conditions, the better prepared you will be to plan the best program possible for these students. In order to further understand and appreciate the specific characteristics of special populations, read the following.

Exceptional Students

Physically Disabled Students

When a teacher is working with children who have musculoskeletal and/or neuromuscular disorders, the following guidelines are recommended.

1. The student should be placed in a position of comfort with the proximal joints (trunk, hips, shoulders, etc.) stabilized to allow for more efficient training of the distal joints (knees, ankles, elbows, wrists, etc.) and to help eliminate undesired motions.
2. Shorter, more frequent sessions of exercise are usually better than intense, longer lasting exercise sessions.

3. An increase in pain lasting longer than three hours and/or a decrease in range of motion or strength may indicate an overdose of training. Anyone can overdo. Monitor the program to ensure that enough effort is being given to realize a training effect; however, pain and injury must be avoided. Rest, ice, compression, and elevation helps to treat overuse injuries. Do not hesitate to refer the student to the school's certified athletic trainer or a physician if there is any doubt about the severity of an apparent injury. When in doubt, refer it out!