

Great Ways To Involve Special Needs Students In Physical Education

10 min

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SEND students are less likely to be actively involved in PE compared to their peers. Read on for some practical tips to get SEND students more active in physical education.

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What Is Inclusive Education?

Inclusive education means that all pupils (including those with SEND) learn together in mainstream schools, even if that requires some form of adaptation for them to access the activities.

PE lessons are no exception to this. All children in the UK are entitled to participate in PE at school. Therefore, for PE to be fully inclusive, the range of activities need to reflect and accommodate the abilities and individual learning needs of all pupils.

When education is inclusive it often benefits all learners, not only SEND learners.

SEND Students And PE



So what does SEND mean and how are teachers equipped to accommodate children with SEND in their PE lessons?

According to NHS England: 'A child or young person has special educational needs and disabilities if they have a learning difficulty and/or a disability that means they need special health and education support.'

Disabilities can be categorised into a physical, learning or sensory disability.

Studies have shown that children with SEND are less likely to be actively involved in physical education compared to their peers because of difficulties with issues such as gross motor skills, motor planning and development and more time needed to process instructions.

In addition to this, there is a distinct lack of time given for physical education during teacher training at primary level. Research has shown that the PE component of initial teacher training is not effective enough to prepare many non-specialist teachers for the delivery of PE, let alone the inclusion of pupils with SEND in PE. A lack of teacher confidence or understanding in this subject will not be improving the activity levels of SEND children in PE.

Adapting Physical Education Activities For Children With Special Needs

Before we give you some practical solutions and tips to get children with SEND more involved in their PE lessons, it might be helpful to be reminded of or introduced to The Activity Inclusion Model (AIM).

The Activity Inclusion Model (AIM) is a vehicle which enables teachers to facilitate inclusion. It is a participant-centred model which helps you to think about how to organise lessons to cater for all ability groups, not just those with disabilities.

Understanding how to do things differently is key to success. Changing the way we think about teaching lessons is fundamental to outstanding teaching; we don't have to always do things in the same way.

The Activity Inclusion Model is one of a number of different inclusion models you may have heard of. The Inclusion Spectrum and Sports Inclusion Models are similar models.

The AIM works by categorising activities into four different groups.

- Open activities are simple, naturally inclusive activities where everyone is included without adaptation or modification, e.g. warm up and cool down activities.
- Modified activities are where everyone can do the same activity but adaptations are made to the space, task, equipment and grouping of participants to support the inclusion of some pupils. Modifications can be applied to support young people who are still acquiring skills or those who need to be challenged further.
- Parallel activities are when participants are grouped according to ability in order to provide different entry points into the same activity. Each young person takes part at a level appropriate to their ability.
- Specific activities. In certain situations it may be impossible for young people with a disability to play alongside their non-disabled peers. This can include disability sports where disabled learners play their sport individually or with their disabled peers. It can also be used as a short-term means of developing skills and confidence with a view to inclusion.

You might also have heard of the STEP model?

STEP is a simple tool which, when used with the Activity Inclusion Model, can guide you through what could be changed to make an activity more inclusive.

This enables you to make an activity harder or easier to ensure there is appropriate challenge for all learners to achieve. Ask yourself:

- Space - Where the activity is happening? How can you adapt it?
- Task - What activity is happening? Can the way the activity is performed be adapted to support or challenge different pupils?
- Equipment - What is being used for the activity? There are endless variations in equipment enabling young people to find the best way to participate in PE.
- People - Who is involved in the activity? For example, you could have different numbers of individuals on teams to balance a game.

Putting Theory Into Practice

Here are some practical suggestions to put the STEP theory into practice.

SPACE

- Make the area bigger or smaller.
- Have different-sized playing areas either side of a net.
- Introduce specific zones.
- Play on a different surface.
- Change the height at which the activity is completed, e.g. on the floor.
- Adjust the positioning of targets.
- Allow participants to start from different places.

TASK

- Simplify the activity by leaving some of the rules out.
- Change rules to foster inclusion, e.g. provide more time.
- Number of touches of the ball.
- Different targets scoring different points.

EQUIPMENT

- Lighter balls travel slower in the air and give more time. Balloons are even better!
- Larger balls are easier to see or catch.
- Softer or slightly deflated balls travel slower along the ground.
- Different coloured balls are good for children with visual impairment. It might be that they prefer one particular colour.
- Larger bats are easier to hit with.
- Lighter bats are easier to manipulate.
- Rackets can be attached to hands, wrists or arms.
- Use equipment that makes a sound for visually impaired students, e.g. bell / rice balls.

PEOPLE

- Pupils can work independently, in groups, in pairs, in teams.
- Group pupils with different/same roles, different/same ability, different/same size.
- Pupils take part in their own space, a big/small/restricted space depending on their needs.

More Ways To Get SEND Students Involved In Physical Education



- Look at the person first and not their impairment. When searching for solutions, often the best way is to simply ask the student how things can work differently for them.
- Take time to get to know individuals, focusing on what they can do as opposed to what they can't.
- Leave appropriate time for students to process information. For example, someone on the autism spectrum or with learning difficulties may require extra time to process each instruction. They may then need to practise a skill many times before being successful; allow them that time.
- Some students with cognitive disabilities may present inappropriate behaviour in PE. Prepare them for PE by using photos or pictures and introduce a routine they know they have to follow.
- To participate in physical activities, successful communication is a crucial factor for young people with a hearing impairment. It is important they have access to the same information as their hearing peers
- Explain what is going to happen in the session before it starts.
- Stand still when speaking. Gather the group together to make general points, rather than during a practice or on the move.
- Agree on a visual signal that will ensure everyone stops when you need them to.
- Explain an action or skill first and then demonstrate it silently, so that children with a hearing impairment can concentrate on your actions rather than having to read your lips as well.
- Remember, children with movement difficulties may need more space to manoeuvre – make sure there enough space between apparatus for all children to move safely around the gym.
- For the visually impaired, try using colour and texture on the floor to signify changes in movement requirements. Carpet squares, textured bath mats, ribbons, electrical tape, and rope are useful pieces of equipment for this.

- Encourage more mobile children to work with and support less mobile children on apparatus. However, always agree with individuals the best way for them to both receive and give support.
- Sports halls and gyms are typically large and brightly lit which can be major barriers to students with some types of neurological and sensory differences. Experiment with how many lights are switched on in the sports hall.
- Be aware of how voices and music echo in a large room.
- Use equipment to divide the hall into smaller work-friendly zones.
- Plan cooperative games that allow for team building so that the whole class can focus on creative games that only succeed when a whole team works together. Parachute games are a fantastic way to get everyone involved.
- Try out SEND-friendly games such as Boccia and Curling.
- Level the playing field by having the whole class play a game such as sitting volleyball.
- Try to explore ways of including rather than reasons for not including SEND students and don't fall into the trap of using one technique just because it worked with someone else with the same impairment.
- Where possible, use visuals and be consistent.
- Work towards not merely accepting but celebrating and welcoming difference and diversity.

Physical Education For Children With Special Needs

There are endless ways to differentiate activities to enable all students to get the most out of their PE lessons. Think: What are you trying to achieve in your lesson and how can you modify an activity so everyone can play together?

It doesn't need to be too time-consuming either. Simply jotting down adaptations to activities on your lesson plan will suffice.

There is one golden rule to remember though: Always find out everything you need to know regarding the participation of your SEND pupils in physical activity prior to any activity taking place. Never assume anything.

Just being involved in a PE lesson is not enough. SEND children need to be challenged and to make progress as well. But with careful planning, the right support and activities all children can fully participate and succeed.

Relevant Resources

Twinkl is an online educational publishing company that produces teaching and educational materials. Our bank of resources includes a range of [SEND resources](#) for special needs children, including a variety of resources that focus specifically on [gross motor skills](#).

Twinkl also offers a PE scheme of work called Move. The fully differentiated lessons, such as this [Y3 Invasion Games pack](#), cover a range of indoor and outdoor sports activities that apply different aspects of the STEP model.