



NASET's Educating Children with Severe Disabilities Series

Recreation and Leisure Activities

Introduction

Studies indicate that between 12 and 20 percent of the American population - perhaps 40 million people - have some type of disability. That's a huge segment of U.S. society that historically has been denied access to outdoor recreation - by facilities built with only able-bodied people in mind, by a lack of special equipment and by a lack of special consideration.

In recent years, however, two things have helped open the outdoors to the disabled: First, across the nation there are several nonprofit groups with the mission of improving the quality of life for disabled people by providing opportunities for outdoor recreation, often using specially adapted equipment.

Another door to the outside opened in 1990, when Congress passed the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act. It ensures basic civil rights for the disabled, and requires that, on any facility built for public use, reasonable efforts be made to provide access to people with a lack of mobility.

Since then, hundreds of outdoor recreational facilities built with government funds have been designed to make access easier for the wheelchair-bound and people using walkers, canes or crutches.

Armed with the law, activists for disabled access began lobbying state and local agencies for other opportunities. Access for the disabled in the outdoors has multiplied exponentially over the past 10 years with the construction of state and federal projects. In this section you will learn about:

- The importance of leisure activities
- Which Activities to Explore
- Issues for Special Educators
- Planning for Success
- The advantages of special leisure programs designed for individuals with disabilities
- Leisure activity concerns of individuals with disabilities
- Mastering leisure skill activities

Overview of Leisure Options

Recreation and leisure form a vital part of our lives. We all need to enjoy ourselves and have fun. Sadly, many adults with disabilities have unnecessarily limited lives - often because the people involved with them do not know where to turn for support. Recreation and leisure activities are a critical dimension of the quality of life for all people, including those with developmental disabilities. There are a vehicle through which people have fun, meet new friends, and develop skills and competencies. Yet, traditionally, recreation/leisure activities are given low priority as an area in which support and assistance are provided. Many people are still limited to segregated recreation and leisure choices. When other opportunities are offered, they often involve taking groupings of people with disabilities to large public settings (e.g., malls, theaters, restaurants), while very little support is offered for individualized participation in community settings that offer greater opportunities for social connections and relationships. While not all people with disabilities need support to participate in recreation and leisure activities, others, particularly those with more severe disabilities, may not have any access to integration recreation and leisure unless supports are available (Walker, 1999).

Importance of Leisure

Successful participation in leisure activities can raise the self-esteem of your students who may have had few successes. It can help people take pride in their achievements when the rest of their lives may be dull and unrewarding. Leisure is also an ideal way of developing warm and positive relationships with other people and extending networks of friends and acquaintances. When people enjoy themselves together in a relaxed environment, friendships can flourish.

Many people with disabilities receive little encouragement to feel good about themselves. They may have been taught by 'sighted' methods, so they found it hard to learn. They may wrongly believe that this 'failure' is their fault and have feelings of worthlessness. They may be aware that other people have very low expectations of them. People with disabilities may then be reluctant to try anything new - so they may have sound reasons for 'opting out' or for avoiding an activity. Alternatively, parents may have been over-concerned about making their child's world safer - so that as adults they may have missed out on activities they might have enjoyed.

It is vital, therefore, that special educators consider carefully how to involve their students so that the pleasure and potential benefits of leisure activities are not missed. It is often the environment, inadequate help and the negative attitudes of others that limit disabled people's participation in leisure activities. This means the setting, the individual issues and the support available (if any is necessary) all have to be considered.

Which activities to Explore

Try to adopt an 'anything is possible' approach to leisure for your students
Individuals with disabilities can enjoy almost any leisure pursuit, provided that:

- you know the individual, and know how he/she might express pleasure, fear and so on
- it is not too complicated or vastly beyond a person's ability
- you think through the activity carefully
- appropriate individual support is available.

Unfortunately, most people are unaware of the range of possible leisure activities which individuals with disabilities might and do enjoy. Often professionals and parents decide how individuals with disabilities should spend their time.

Many people have never been told that they do not have to participate in every activity organized within a day center, club or household. Alternatively, they may lack communication skills to explain that they would rather do something else. Sometimes people's wishes are simply overlooked or ignored - not always accidentally!

If people have spent all their leisure time in groups, they may not know how many things become possible if they have one-to-one help. Others know exactly what they would like to do, perhaps opting to do something which has afforded friends or family status or has allowed them to join in with their peers.

Choosing leisure activities with/for people who may have had limited opportunity in life can feel like an overwhelming task - particularly if they have no obvious means of communication. But nearly everyone can show their pleasure or displeasure, and provide professionals with many pointers as to what they might like to do. You might consider what someone likes doing and can it be built on?

When people have had little success in life, it may be appropriate for them to take part in an activity where no-one wins or loses or where a person has such a warm relationship with their carer that failure does not matter.

Other people need to be allowed to fail - in order, perhaps, to learn that they cannot be good at everything, or that there are other people who are better at this activity, or even just to help them make other choices. It is also worth considering age-appropriateness. Young adults may not want to be stigmatized by taking part in childish activities. Older people with learning difficulties may find energetic activities too tiring. Some activities (such as joining a country dance group or a local computer club) may provide opportunities to develop new relationships. Other activities are more solitary - such as doing jigsaw puzzles alone - and do not help people make friends.

Recreation and leisure activities should begin with the individual. Explore over several meetings the needs, interests, skills, fears, and limitations of the individual. Keep in mind that leisure and recreation activities should be enjoyable, not frustrating and overwhelming. Questions that should be considered include (Lieberman, 1999):

- What types of recreation has he or she participated in previously?
- What are this person's favorite activities?
- With whom does he or she prefer to spend leisure time?
- At what time of day is recreation most enjoyable for this person?

People who are disabled are as diverse in their interests as everyone else. Check the list below for some ideas. Remember, this list is only a start.

Fitness Activities

aerobics
running
swimming
cross-country skiing
walking
weight lifting
track and field
gymnastics
wrestling
bicycling (stationary/tandem) Outdoor Activities
fishing/camping
hiking

canoeing
kayaking
horseback riding
sledding
rowing

Home Activities

cooking
gardening
needlepoint
knitting
arts and crafts
listening to music
table games
card games
bingo
dominoes
board games (chess, checkers, etc.)

Community Activities

bowling
ice skating
roller skating
dances (folk/social)
martial arts
diving
Sports Activities

Special Olympics

community leagues
goal ball (persons with hearing)
American Athletic Assoc for the Deaf
school sports
US Assoc for Blind Athletes

Issues for Special Educators

It is important that special educators realize that some people can be very anxious about new activities. They may worry about looking stupid, or be embarrassed at how slowly they may learn. They may have no idea that sighted people might find the activity just as difficult! People who have taken part in an activity before may feel much more confident than those without previous experience.

Lieberman, (1998) suggests that in order to maintain interest in an activity several points need to be considered:

Establish a Time Period: Establish a period of time that is appropriate for trying out a new activity. At the end of the period, let each person evaluate the pleasure derived from the activity. He or she can then decide whether or not to continue. Use of a time period helps prevent feelings of failure; it also ensures that enough time is given to the activity to provide adequate information for making a good decision. For example: 17-year-old Robert chooses Tae Kwon Do in the community club.

The parents suggest a 6-week session to determine if he enjoys the activity. At the end of the 6 weeks, Robert may choose to continue, or he may end the session and choose another activity.

Select the Proper Time of Day for the Activity: Try to schedule the recreational activity for the time it is most needed to meet individual needs. For example: Amy is a 14-year-old who is in an educational setting. She is faster than her peers at getting dressed in the morning. As a result, Amy has 20-25 minutes every morning when she has nothing planned, and there are not enough staff to direct her play or an activity. She used to engage in self-abuse and became intensely agitated. When the recreation specialist noted that Amy loves to ride the stationary bike, the bike was made easily accessible to her. Now, every morning, Amy gets on the bike and rides for 20-25 minutes. She does not become agitated, and her self-abusive behavior has disappeared.

Modify the Activity When Necessary: Most recreational activities were developed with hearing and sighted people in mind. In many cases, an adaptation that is relatively minor can make these activities enjoyable and safe for those who are deaf-blind. For example, the children in Shannon's Girl Scout troop go roller skating every week. Shannon, like many young individuals who are deaf-blind, has difficulty keeping her balance. By using a skate aid device Shannon can safely participate in roller skating.

Ask each person if he or she prefers the help of a guide or assistance from peers. However, be aware that some persons may prefer activities that promote personal independence.

Individuals with disabilities need clear instructions that make sense to them. Staff members need to give precise advice that is relevant to the specific disability. For instance, individuals with visual impairments will need different explanations depending on their level of vision - a totally blind person might need more detailed information than a person with some useful vision. It is important that explanations and instructions are given in a way that people can both hear and understand. In some situations, verbal explanations will not be enough - people will need staff to consider providing information in other ways - perhaps through other senses, usually touch or smell.

Depending on the activity being considered, it could be very important that staff know the individual well. Knowledge of that person's level of understanding and the implications of his/her disability will assist staff in deciding what sort of help that person may need initially.

Staff or volunteer helpers often need to consider what information and skills a participant should have before the activity is introduced. Some, for example, may need to learn reaching and grasping skills before being able to catch or throw a ball. Others may need to learn how to find their way around first, perhaps to the changing rooms or toilet.

It is important that people have some method of expressing choice or refusing to take part. They may need to learn the sign for an activity - such as for swimming. If they do not speak or use sign, alternative methods of communication need to be employed so their wishes can be taken into account. People might understand that a riding hat will be handed to them to feel before they are lifted on to a horse.

Planning for success

Thinking through an activity from start to finish and paying attention to detail may prevent problems that could easily have been identified in advance. Organizing sufficient friendly help for individuals takes time. Individuals may need several 'taster sessions' to discover if they like doing new things and it is important to consider who might accompany them. The fact that an escort might love or loathe an activity might affect another person's enjoyment.

This is a brief checklist of important things to consider before embarking on new leisure pursuits:

- Who has chosen the activity? why?
- How, where and by whom is the activity to be introduced?
- What assistance does the person require?
- Can the individual choose his/her escort or helper?
- Is it age-appropriate?
- Age of staff member or helper?
- Would the activity be more successful if there was a male or female helper - or someone from a particular ethnic group?
- What is the escort's role?
- Are they really helping or taking over?
- How much should the escort or helper actually do?
- Is the escort helping more than one person?
- Does the person need to have or learn any particular skills before the activity is attempted?
- What do staff need to know?
- Are there personal safety or individual eye safety issues?
- Is the activity taking place when it suits the individual? Have the individual's preferences and comfort been considered?
- Has the person a sign for the activity or an object reference to help them understand what is going to happen next? Can they make choices?
- Do staff or helpers know where to get appropriate advice?

When the student is involved in the transition from school to adult life, a healthy part of this journey should include leisure activities. You can discover a child's leisure interests by having him or her sample a variety of activities. Parents of very young children in today's society normally expose them to a wide variety of experiences such as:

- dance classes
- Little League
- music lessons
- scouting
- sports activities
- cultural experiences
- travel
- art lessons

As the student without disabilities grows older, this process of sampling leisure interests depends less on the parents and more on the peer group. For young people with disabilities, however, parents and other family members may continue to guide or structure leisure experiences. This extended period of parental guidance and involvement should be considered a realistic part of the transitional process to adulthood for a student with disabilities. Learning specific leisure skills can be an important component for successful integration into community recreation programs. Research has shown that leisure skill training contributes to a sense of competence, social interaction, and appropriate behavior.

Advantages of Special Leisure Programs

One of the issues that parents and professionals have to address is whether a child should participate in activities designed specifically for people with disabilities or enter activities geared for a more mainstreamed population. The advantages of a special program designed for children with disabilities follow:

- may allow the only opportunity for some children with severe disabilities to participate, for example, Special Olympics
- allows for a sense of group identity
- provides a setting for social interaction
- creates a more level playing field so that the disabled individual's abilities become the focus rather than the disability

On the other hand, concentrating on "disabled only" activities may unnecessarily exclude individuals from many leisure opportunities, and prevents interaction with the nondisabled community.

Individual Concerns When Faced With Leisure Activities

One of the greatest concerns of individuals with disabilities is the problems they may face assimilating into the social world. Many students receive special services while in school that expose them to other children with disabilities. This social interaction and connection provides a foundation for improving social skills. Once school experience ends and the child is confronted with the mainstream world, however, many of these social opportunities are not available and social isolation is often the result. Social isolation is probably the most painful aspect that individuals with disabilities face when they enter adulthood. Therefore, a parent, particularly, play a crucial role in assisting the child by providing the exposure to leisure and recreational activities. Parents may often find themselves the only agent for this particular aspect of life-especially once the child leaves the school setting.

Mastering Leisure Activity Skills

In order to best assist people to participate in integrated settings, it may be necessary to provide some supports or accommodations. Supports must be both individualized and flexible (Schleien, Ray, & Green, 1997; Taylor, Knoll, & Biklen, 1987; Walker & Edinger, 1988; Walker, Edinger, Willis, & Kenney, 1988); both the types and levels of support should be based on the needs and desires of the particular person. These supports should fit into the rhythms and routines of the setting or activity. There are many different types of possible supports and accommodations; many of these will benefit all participants, not just those with disabilities (Komissar, Hart, Friedlander, Tufts, & Paiewonsky, 1997).

Support can involve such things as physically assisting the person to be part of the activity, and/or assisting him or her to be a part of social interactions. It can involve helping the person acquire particular skills and competencies, adaptation of part or all of an activity, and/or use of adaptive devices and equipment (Walker, 1999).

Mastering a leisure activity skill provides many advantages for the individuals with disabilities. This process will:

- increase the individual's interest level
- increase self-esteem and confidence through the mastery of skills
- provide the individual with communication topics for social interaction
- broaden the individual's knowledge base

As opportunities for recreation and leisure are investigated by both the parents and the child, several considerations may arise:

- What is the experiential and sensitivity level of the people running the program in an integrated activity?

- How much will the activity or program cost?
- How will the individual get to the activity?
- Is the activity integrated?
- Does the individual need or want to have someone supervise or accompany him or her while participating in the activity?
- Will the activity occur regularly? An optimal leisure plan would include a balance of ongoing and one-time-only activities.

Conclusions

Once the leisure activities available within a community have been examined, options must be weighed and selected to ensure continuous and growing experiences. The value that individuals with disabilities attach to each of the questions above will depend on their interests, residential situation, and accessibility.

A wide variety of leisure activities is available; these activities may be either integrated or specifically geared to those with disabilities. While integrated or mainstreamed activities abound, special programs may be harder to find.