

Awareness Activities

By Kelly Neiber

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Background:

I have been a special education teacher for over 20 years and I've always wondered what it was like to have the disabilities some of my students have had. If they were able, they would try to describe what it was like to me, which helped, but the kinesthetic side of me needed to experience it. That's what fed my desire to find activities like these.

I also try to help my students be advocates for themselves. They are always striving to be "just like everyone else". I try to help them figure out ways for them to be included in school. This is exactly my rationale of why I feel the need to educate people that they need to be "aware" and experience what it's like to walk in someone else's shoes. Through understanding I believe the inclusion and proper treatment of those people who have disabilities.

My title came from a wise young man from Iowa, Tyler Greene. He says significant people in his life saw him for what he could do, not what he couldn't, and they were practicing "ability awareness". Through this he hopes to change the attitudes and ways people interact with people with disabilities.

Vision

*Hide an object somewhere in the room but in plain sight. Send a student to look for it and the class takes note on how long it takes them to find it. Have another student come to the front of the room and put a blindfold on them. Re hide an object for them to find. No one can say anything or give them any clues. After awhile allow one person to give them directions from their seat. They cannot physically touch or guide them. Discuss with the student who is blindfolded what it was like when they had no help. Then discuss what it was like when they had a little bit of help. Encourage students to be helpful whenever they see someone who is blind (helpful not physically touching them).

*Blindfold or wear somebody else's glasses (for a short while to avoid eye strain). Put together a puzzle, draw a picture, write your name.

*Have students get with a partner. One will be a 'guide' and the other a 'blind person'. The guide's job is to help the blind person maneuver through a classroom to a chair, (or through the hallways into the restroom, etc). They can tell them how to do it and can also touch them to help guide their way. Make sure the blindfold is on and foolproof. Send the partners to the hall and rearrange the room. Their chair shouldn't be too easy to get to. HINT: most guides grab the blind person and push them around. What will happen is the blind person runs into things. Guides usually don't describe the path and say look out instead of stop at major obstacles. When they reach the chair, they usually spin them around and push them into the seat then leave without saying anything. Debrief: did the guide do a good job? How would it feel to be the blind person being dragged or pushed? What would be more helpful than saying look out? How did the volunteers feel? Show them the correct way to do this (blind person holds onto the guides upper arm)

*Vaseline or duct tape on goggles/old glasses can be used as a blindfold as they are hard to see out of.

*Blurred Vision – use an overhead or in focus machine with a sheet that has a lot of text on it. **Make sure the projector is out of focus!** Tell group to copy the information. Ask them questions about the text. Discuss how frustrating it is when you are trying and paying attention but can't see. Discuss ways they could be helpful to someone with vision problems.

Famous people: Helen Keller, Franklin Roosevelt, Harriett Tubman, Stevie Wonder

Physical

*Put a sling, socks, pot holders on a volunteers hands and dowel/ruler on leg, then give them a task to do like picking something up of the floor or tying shoes. Discuss how it felt to do simple tasks with the use of only one limb; have them describe it. Brainstorm suggestions about things they can do to help people who have this type of disability.

*Lower leg mobility – tie a dowel or ruler to the back of the leg so that the leg doesn't bend. Try putting on pants, socks, shoes, or walk up stairs. Join in a game that involves sitting on the floor and then getting up and moving.

*Upper limb mobility – put a dominant arm in a sling or tie a dowel to the arm so it doesn't bend or strap fingers together, then pick up a glass, button shirt, zip pants, drink from it, make a sandwich, use a cell phone, text, etc

*If you have access to a wheelchair(s), you could have students try to get around the campus pushing themselves in a wheelchair (it is harder than it looks).

Famous People:

Parkinsons – Michael J. Fox and Muhammad Ali

Spine bifida – John Cougar Mellencamp and Hank Williams, Sr

Amputees – Heather Mills, Bethany Hamilton, Ted Kennedy, Jr

Quadriplegia – Christopher Reeves and Teddy Pendergrass

Hearing

Hearing loss doesn't simply mean that sounds are not loud enough. Sounds could be distorted or unclear. After talking to colleagues, some people become deaf due to ear infections throughout their lives and develop scar tissue.

*Ask students what sounds they value.

*What do they value about being able to hear?

*Ask if they have had any experience with hearing impairment. Discuss how they perceive the hearing loss affecting the person they knows life.

*Wear earmuffs, ear plugs, an I pod or walkman/radio playing “buzz” or loud music. Have them join a game which relies on hearing.

Famous People: Pete Townshend, Beethoven, Lou Ferrigno, and Thomas Edison

Speech

*Gag someone using a scarf, making sure they can still breathe easily, and they have to go through a meeting/activity mute.

*Have someone put marshmallows in their mouth and try to talk to a group.

Famous people who stuttered at some point in their lives: Bruce Willis, Tiger Woods, Julia Roberts, and Mel Tillus. Deaf - Helen Keller and Marlee Matlin.

Intellectual

This includes Down syndrome, autism, bipolar, and Asperger syndrome. These people often have difficulty communicating and may have limited receptive and expressive language. It is sometimes hard to understand what they are trying to communicate. Dyslexia falls into this category. They have problems with written language namely decoding, reading, and spelling. NOTE: many of these activities would simulate the struggles that an ELL (English Language Learner) would have in classrooms and social situations.

*This illustrates the frustration people have when they can't verbally communicate their needs. Activity - Write a simple sentence on a piece of paper (I used "The Cat sat on a hot tin roof"). Show someone the sentence and ask them to relay the sentence to the group without writing, speaking or using any letters of the alphabet. Discuss the problems and difficulties for both groups.

*This is what it is like to assume that someone can read. Activity - Write a number of sentences backwards on a piece of paper, and ask different people to decipher them. This could also be done in groups. Example: "ehT kcalb tact as no eht toh nit foor" would be "The black cat sat on a hot tin roof." Discuss the difficulties they had figuring out what the sentence said.

*This demonstrates the problems some have in demonstrating receptive language. Activity - In partners, have them sit back to back. One of them will be given paper with a design on it. They need to explain to their partner how to draw it. This is done without the person drawing talking. After an allotted time stop them and have them face each other to see their work. Discuss how they did. Have partners switch roles, give a new design to draw but this time they can talk and ask questions. Discuss what worked this time.

*Some people in this category have problems working in groups or acting in a manner that is socially acceptable. Activity - Four people need to form a standing square by placing their arms around the person to their left and right. Then they have to navigate around the outside of the room. What were the difficulties encountered by this exercise? Did everyone feel comfortable invading personal spaces? How did you cope if anyone worked against the rest of the group?

Famous People:

Autism – Daryl Hannah

Asperger Syndrome – Dan Aykroyd

Dyslexia – Cher, Danny Glover, George Burns, Tom Cruise, and Henry Winkler

Inclusion Theatre

Have a discussion about correct ways to interact with people with disabilities and the proper language to use when discussing disability. When the group understands the guidelines, divide them into groups and role play for 2-3 minutes each disability related scenario below.

*A group of friends enter a restaurant to eat lunch. One friend is deaf. The server approaches the table to take the order.

*A teacher asks you to play host/guide to a new student in class who is blind.

*You go to the movie with your friends. When you sit down you notice that the person next to you has an assistance dog.

*Your substitute English teacher has a wheelchair.

*Your family is invited to a party at the neighbor's house. You've never met them but you know their son has an intellectual disability.

In the first round, each group's skit should contain language and interactions that are intentionally incorrect. The other groups should point out what the mistakes are. In the second round each group should use proper language and follow proper interaction guidelines. If desired, you could present these to the whole school, community, etc.

Modification or inclusion

*Use bright colored balls or objects in your activities so those with vision disabilities can see them, plus they are more colorful and fun.

*Hula hoops can be used around any body part not just the waist. Let them use whatever limb that functions.

*They could be the turner in jump rope.

*Use yarnballs or other objects to knock down bowling pins.

*In any activity, deaf students can "mirror" the actions even though they can't hear it.

Poem: Kids Who Are Different by Digby Wolfe

Here's to the kids who are different,
The kids who don't always get A's,
The kids who have ears twice the size of their peers,
And noses that go on for days.

Here's to the kids who are different,
The kids they call crazy or dumb,
The kids who don't fit, with the guts and the grit,
Who dance to a different drum...

Here's to the kids who are different,
The kids with the mischievous streak,
For when they have grown, as history's shown,
It's their differences that make them unique.

Myth breakers

1. A disability is not contagious. (There is a difference between having a disability and having an illness or accident that may cause disabilities).
2. Having a disability is not a punishment. People who have a disability are not bad nor do they have a disability because they are bad.
3. Usually a person with a disability cannot be cured. There are modifications and adaptations that can be done so a person can be as independent as possible.
4. People with disabilities are not necessarily in need of constant care. They are not sick.

Proper language

Using proper words and phrases need to give positive perceptions and attitudes. Typically people have to overcome prejudice rather than their disabilities.

1. Refer to the person first not the disability. Don't say "a disabled person". Instead refer to "a person with a disability".
2. Never group individuals together as "the mentally retarded" which focuses on the disability and not the person.
3. Avoid emotional and sensationalist words when describing a person with a disability such as inspirational, courageous, pitiful or in need of charity. Both extremes are stereotypes. Try to use nonjudgmental terms and phrases that give an image of dignity and respect.

Communication Tips

1. Use eye contact and speak directly to the person not the interpreter.
2. When meeting someone, offer to shake their hand.
3. When meeting a visually impaired person always identify yourself and anyone else with you. When talking in a group, identify the person to whom you are speaking.
4. If you offer assistance, wait until they accept and then listen or ask for instructions.
5. Treat adults as adults. If you are calling everyone else by their first name do the same with them. Never patronize people who use a wheelchair by patting them on the head or shoulder.
6. A wheelchair is part of their personal space. If you lean on their chair it's like leaning on a person.
7. If someone has difficulty speaking, patiently listen attentively and wait for them to finish. Do not correct them or finish their sentences for them. Ask questions that require short answers or a nod/shake of the head. Don't pretend to understand them if you don't. Repeat what you heard or understood and let them respond.
8. When speaking with a person who uses a wheelchair or crutches, place yourself at eye level in front of the person for the conversation.

9. To get the attention of a person who is deaf, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand. Make sure you look directly at them and speak slowly with expression as they may be able to read your lips.
10. Relax! Don't be embarrassed when you use common jargon like "see you later" or "did you hear about that" which seem to relate to their disability. It's ok to ask them questions when you are unsure of what to do.

NOTE: Be sure to ASK before helping. Some people would rather do things for themselves.

Sources:

Since I am a special education teacher, I have 23 years worth of activities, experience, and knowledge. I have pulled from everywhere, but the sources below I thought were quite wonderful and useful. They are in no particular order of importance or significance. ☺

www.iowastudentcouncils.org

www.IndianaDisabilityAwareness.org

www.co.sanmateo.ca.us/smc/dempartment

www.imtyler.org

www.pecentral.org/lessonideas/printlesson.asp?ID=4368

www.education-world.com/a_lesson/lesson115.shtml

www.openroad.net.au/access/dakit/intellectual/inhandout4.htm

<http://www.vcu.edu/partnership/C-SAL/downloadables/PDF/DisabilityAwarenessPacket.pdf> (AMAZING)

www.specialolympics.org

www.r-word.org

www.bestbuddies.org

www.spartansparkles.com and www.thesparkleeffect.org