



OTA SPOTLIGHT: Programming and Participants
with Special Needs

1. Participants with Special Needs

- **Defining Terms**
- **Understanding Expectations**
- **Clear Communication**
- **“Company Policy”**
- **The Special Needs Participant**

2. Programming for Special Needs

- **Need and Opportunity**
- **Communicating Goals (OTA and Partners)**
- **Program Implementation (Curriculum and Agendas)**
- **Safety and Personnel**

Over the years, some parents have asked OTA to accommodate a special needs participant in our programming, and OTA has also been approached to partner with special needs organizations. Careful evaluation of expectations, expertise, safety, and other variables should be done before embarking on or agreeing to any special need's participant or programming.

Participants with Special Needs

Defining Terms

Recognize that the term “special needs” has a broad connotation – ultimately it refers to a situation that causes an individual to require additional or specialized services or accommodations.

- Physical Handicap
- Cognitive Disability – learning disability or impairment
- Emotional or Behavioral Challenges

Understanding Expectations

Communication and understanding are so important to evaluating each situation to determine whether OTA has the capacity, safety, and personnel to meet the needs of the participant in question. The type of “special need” can play a significant role in determining the safety and feasibility of program participation, especially in the context of youth sports.

Company Policy

To be clear – OTA can notify a parent at any time that they need to come retrieve their child from a program due to behavioral, cognitive, emotional, or physical situations that don't allow the child to properly participate in the activities or causes an unsafe situation or environment as it relates to interacting with other participants, campers, instructors, or altering the ratio plan we have in place for the program.

Should a parent try to “negotiate” a special circumstance, like paying for an individual instructor, we politely decline letting them know that we aren't set up (or even licensed) to make these types of accommodations. **Use the term “company policy” to reinforce the point (making it known this decision is out of the hands of onsite personnel).**

Participants with Special Needs

We try and be compassionate for certain situations that parents might be in, but it is maddening when those same parents don't find their own compassion for what we at OTA are trying to do... and do safely. Discovering that a child in a program (after the program has begun) might possess special needs can be a very difficult situation for staff in real time, as well as management once notified.

Couple Things when confronted with a participant who requires special accommodations

1. Stay away from using any medical or diagnostic terms. It's irrelevant to us. If a child can't function in a way that allows them to be a part of the group properly, we simply note our observations to the parents, for example: *"This young boy could not even go to the bathroom on his own. He could not follow instructions and could not participate in the activities."* Getting into any "special needs" terms is something that can be a slippery slope.
4. Should a parent say that they cannot pick the child up immediately, we ask if their alternative emergency contact can be notified. If not, we let them know that if that is the case, the child will be sitting on the side for the remainder of the day – hopefully we have some books or coloring they can do – and will not be participating in any activities due to safety reasons.
5. When this has come up, we have issued a full refund to make it clear they will not be allowed back the following day.
7. For camps, we do not knowingly accept participants who require accommodations. However, I will tell you that over the years we have made accommodations for after school programs. This comes up when a parent is honest with us and asks if it's possible for the child (with special needs) to participate. Our response includes two points:
 - **Whatever accommodations the child has during the school day (i.e. - one on one aid), they must have at the OTA After School Program.**
 - **We are clear that the participation will be on a TRIAL BASIS – and if at any point during the program it's a bad or dangerous fit, we will pull the plug and prorate the registration fee (if it went on more than 1 class).**

Special Needs Programming

Need and Opportunity

The inclusion of children with special needs in sports programs is not just a growing trend, but a necessary step toward fostering an inclusive society. Many children with special needs face challenges when participating in mainstream sports activities due to physical, cognitive, or sensory barriers. However, with appropriate adaptations, these children can benefit significantly from sports, experiencing improvements in physical health, social skills, self-esteem, and overall well-being.

OTA has a unique opportunity to address this need by creating a specialized sports program and partnering with organizations that represent the needs of all children. This initiative aligns with OTA's mission to provide accessible and enjoyable sports experiences for all children. By establishing ourselves as leaders in inclusive programming, we can also tap into a new segment of the youth sports market, attracting families, schools, and community organizations dedicated to supporting children with special needs.

Communicating Goals (OTA and Partners)

To ensure the success of the program, it's essential to establish clear communication channels and goals with our partners, including schools, special education programs, local community centers, and parents. The primary goals of any special needs program should include:

- **Inclusion:** Ensure that all children, regardless of their abilities, have the opportunity to participate in sports in a supportive and encouraging environment.
- **Development:** Promote physical, social, and emotional development through activities that are tailored to each child's individual abilities and needs.
- **Awareness:** Raise awareness about the importance of inclusion in youth sports and demonstrate how adaptive sports programming can be effectively implemented.
- **Collaboration:** Work closely with partners to continuously assess the needs of participants and make adjustments to the program to meet these needs effectively.

Regular meetings, feedback sessions, and collaborative planning will be vital in maintaining alignment on these goals and addressing any challenges that arise during the program's implementation.

- **Program Descriptions, personnel requirements, ratio and staff scheduling plans, class format, program curriculum, equipment approval, and customer service channels, ALL need to be established and agreed upon with partnering organization PRIOR to offering and running the programs.**

Program Implementation (Curriculum and Agendas)

The success of the program relies on a well-structured curriculum and agenda that is both flexible and tailored to the unique needs of children with special needs. Below is a SAMPLE of a proposed curriculum and agenda for an 8-week sports class.

8-Week Sports Class Curriculum

Week 1: Introduction to Sports and Movement

- **Objective:** Familiarize children with the concept of sports and basic movements.
- **Activities:** Gentle warm-up exercises, introduction to basic skills like throwing and catching, and simple group games.
- **Focus:** Building comfort and confidence in a new environment, promoting social interaction.

Week 2: Coordination and Balance

- **Objective:** Enhance coordination and balance through adapted exercises.
- **Activities:** Balance beam walking, coordination drills with balls, and obstacle courses.
- **Focus:** Encouraging physical development, building trust in the equipment and coaches.

Week 3: Teamwork and Communication

- **Objective:** Teach the importance of teamwork and effective communication.
- **Activities:** Group games that require collaborative challenges, and paired activities.
- **Focus:** Social skills development, learning to work with peers.

Week 4: Introduction to Specific Sports (Example: Soccer)

- **Objective:** Introduce basic soccer skills tailored to individual abilities.
- **Activities:** Dribbling, passing, and shooting drills, followed by a simple game.
- **Focus:** Structured skill development and promoting enthusiasm for the sport.

Week 5: Introduction to Specific Sports (Example: Basketball)

- **Objective:** Introduce basic basketball skills tailored to individual abilities.
- **Activities:** Dribbling, shooting, and passing drills, followed by a simple game.
- **Focus:** Building on motor skills and enhancing hand-eye coordination.

Week 6: Building Endurance and Strength

- **Objective:** Improve physical fitness through fun and adaptive exercises.
- **Activities:** Circuit training with adapted exercises, relay races, and stamina-building activities.
- **Focus:** Encouraging physical fitness while ensuring activities remain enjoyable and accessible.

Week 7: Advanced Teamwork and Strategy

- **Objective:** Build on earlier teamwork skills with more complex group activities.
- **Activities:** Team strategy games, adapted competitive drills, and collaborative problem-solving exercises.
- **Focus:** Deepening social bonds, introducing the concept of strategy in sports.

Week 8: Celebration and Review

- **Objective:** Celebrate achievements and reinforce learned skills.
- **Activities:** A mini-sports day with a variety of games, awards ceremony, and a review of the key lessons learned.
- **Focus:** Recognition of each child's progress, fostering a sense of accomplishment, and encouraging continued participation in sports.

Weekly Agenda for Sports Class

- **Warm-Up (10 minutes):** Gentle exercises to prepare the body for activity, including stretches and light cardiovascular movements.
- **Skill Introduction (15 minutes):** Introduction of the week's focus skill, demonstrated by the coach and practiced by the children with assistance as needed.
- **Skill Practice (20 minutes):** Supervised practice of the skill, with adjustments and support provided to ensure all children can participate fully.
- **Group Activity/Game (15 minutes):** A fun group activity or game that incorporates the skill learned, encouraging teamwork and social interaction.
- **Cool Down and Reflection (10 minutes):** Gentle cool-down exercises followed by a group discussion to reflect on the day's activities and experiences.

***Agendas should all be created with the PARTICIPANT POPULATION, PROGRAMMING SPACE, AND SUPERVISION in mind (will parents, guardians, relatives, partnering organization staff, be assisting OTA Instructors with instruction and care of participants?)**

Safety and Personnel

Safety is paramount in any OTA program, and this is especially true when working with children with special needs. To ensure a safe and supportive environment, a discussion with the partnering organization prior to agreeing to programming should include questions about implementing the following measures:

- **Specialized Training for Staff:** Do coaches and staff involved in the program need to undergo specialized training on working with children with special needs? If so, does the partnering organization provide this training? Will the training cover understanding different types of disabilities, effective communication strategies, behavior management, and adaptive coaching techniques?
- **Appropriate Staffing Ratios:** What will it require to maintain a low staff-to-child ratio to ensure that each child receives the individual attention and support they need? Will additional support staff or volunteers be engaged as necessary? Does the registration fee and program budget accommodate the low staff-to-child ratio?
- **Emergency Preparedness:** Do coaches and staff need to be trained in first aid and CPR, with specific instructions on how to respond to potential emergencies involving special needs children? Will partnering organization be reviewing emergency plans regularly and communicating protocols to all staff?
- **Safety Equipment:** Will review and approval of all equipment and gear used in special needs program be completed by partnering organization? All sports equipment used in the program will be adapted or modified to ensure it is safe and appropriate for the children involved. Regular equipment checks will be conducted to maintain safety standards.
- **Ongoing Assessment:** Will continuous assessment of the program be carried out from class to class to ensure that it meets the needs of all participants? Feedback from parents, children, and staff will be actively sought to make necessary adjustments.