

1. If you are new to coaching children with special needs, running a special needs class as a parent and tot class is often a successful strategy. Utilize a standard preschool curriculum as a basis for these lesson plans.

2. Grouping children with similar needs is another way to run successful classes. This allows the coach to become familiar with the movement needs of each disability. When utilizing this strategy, study the characteristics of the disability and place stations into the lesson plan that meet the movement needs and address the characteristics of the targeted disability.

3. Mainstreaming should always be the goal for any child who has a special need. Sensory integration issues can pose difficulty in mainstreaming. If there is a child with a sensory integration disability mainstreamed into a class, utilizing a standard lesson plan, include a linear, gross motor and rotary station (i.e. walk on a line, climb over a mat, spin on a rope) into the equipment set-up. All children will benefit from these movements, but children with sensory integration disabilities will respond well with these incorporated into the set-up. The vestibular input provided by this sequence of movement helps them to calm and focus.

4. When mainstreaming a child for the first time, provide for additional help in the class. Either allow the parent to join the class or place a "floater" coach with the class to help the child become familiar with class structure and remain on-task.

5. Rules apply to ALL children. It is important that EVERY child follow the rules of the gym. One of the benefits of class participation is socialization. Children who have special needs MUST be treated like every other child, and must be required to follow the same rules as their peers.

6. To avoid "meltdowns," provide calming activities. These can either be incorporated into the class lesson plan, or kept in close proximity for rapid access in the event they are needed. Examples of calming activities include, glitter bottles, towels for wrapping, exercise balls for rocking, water play, beads to string, or a springboard for repetitive jumps.

7. Allow for children with sensory integration disabilities to do an impact activity such as jumping on the trampoline before stretch. This allows them to calm and organize their bodies through proprioceptive activity prior to focused activity.

8. Incorporate bilateral work such as belly creeps, crawling and bear walks into the lesson plans. These help the corpus callosum to engage the two sides of the brain. Fundamental movements are important in creating the synapse development and they are often ignored.

9. When first meeting a child who has special needs, set up an appointment during the quiet time in the afternoon, prior to afternoon classes. This allows them to meet the coach, acclimate to the environment and it allows for the coach and the parent to discuss individual characteristics, set goals and share information specific to the child. This also allows the coach to watch movement and assess needs prior to starting class.

10. Like mainstreaming, acclimation to a normalized environment is important for children with special needs. Still, given the overly stimulating characteristics of the gym environment, it can be very difficult for a child with a sensory integration disability to immediately incorporate into a fully active gym. Allowing them to start during the quiet times prior to afternoon classes in one-on-one sessions can help them gradually acclimate to the environment. Decrease distractions in the first few classes such as dimming lights and turning music off. As they become accustomed to the gym, gradually introduce distracting environmental stimulants.



11. Take a picture of yourself or the gym, and give it to the parent to show the child on the way to the gym each week. This allows the child to process the upcoming activity in advance.
12. Give time warnings prior to changing activities. For example, "In 5 minutes we will be moving to bars. In 4 minutes we will be moving to bars. In 3 minutes we will be moving to bars..." This allows the child time to process the transition from one activity to another.
13. When starting a new child who has processing difficulty, provide a visual activity board that shows the sequence of activities for the day. As each activity is completed, remove the picture indicating that activity so they child can track progress, and anticipate the upcoming activity. Once the child has been in the class for a period of time, slowly decrease the use of the visual board so they can acclimate to the gym activities without the visual warnings.
14. When children have to wait for turns, place slightly deflated balls or half-donut mats in the waiting station. This allows the children to sit on rocking surfaces, and helps them to calm as they wait.
15. Give children who over-stimulate easily a "safe zone" to which to retreat if they feel overwhelmed. This can be a place away from activity where they can calm before rejoining the class.
16. Another good option for children who can tell when they are becoming over-stressed is to give them a signal they can use to let you know they need to remove themselves from the activity to calm themselves.
17. Always be very careful with instructions. Children who have sensory integration disabilities are not only very visual, but they are also very literal. If you say something, they will take it at face value.
18. Provide a variety of textures in the class for children to experience. This helps with tactile defensiveness and provides sensory input often sought by children with disabilities.
19. Seizure-prone children must be closely monitored anytime there is height. High beams can be very dangerous for these children and should be avoided. Floor beams are better, but MUST be spotted. Even the slightest height can be dangerous if a child experiences a seizure. Bars are also a safety hazard for these children and they must be closely monitored and spotted when doing bars activities.
20. After getting permission from the parent to do so, try to talk to doctors, teachers, therapists and any other person who works closely with the child. This will give you insight on the things they need help with the most, or the areas these specialists are trying to address. Augmenting their efforts is a great benefit to the child.

