

# Solutions for Including Individuals with Disabilities

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## Promoting Leadership in Physical Education and Recreation

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*Opportunities to lead should and can be made available to all students regardless of their physical abilities.*

**D**ora is a third grader who is deaf. She is very athletic and greatly enjoys participating in physical education. Her physical education teacher, Ms. Schedlin, noticed that after instruction for each activity, Dora waited 10 to 20 seconds to initiate her movement skill. When Ms. Schedlin asked about her hesitation, she said that she just wanted to watch her classmates so she would know what to do and follow them. This made sense to Ms. Schedlin because even though Dora had an interpreter, Dora did not always know exactly what she was expected to do. A few weeks later, Ms. Schedlin realized that she never asked Dora to demonstrate, that Dora never asked to be a captain, and that Dora seemed to expect to follow her peers all the time. Ms. Schedlin became concerned and discussed this with Dora's classroom teacher, who said she had observed the same behavior. They decided to work together to ensure that Dora gained some leadership experience. With some encouragement from Ms. Schedlin, Dora led her class in stretching, helped with attendance once a month, and became a squad leader for the obstacle course unit. Both teachers noticed that she started to initiate games at recess and that she did not always wait to start her movement activities in class.

Students with and without disabilities need opportunities to lead, just as they need developmentally appropriate pedagogy and opportunities for physical and academic skill acquisition. Experiencing opportunities to be a leader can improve a student's self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-perception (Sherrill, 2004). What is unfortunate is that some students may not be considered for leadership roles. Average students, students with disabilities, or students who are not physically talented may be offered opportunities for leadership less often than their peers who are seen as having strong physical skills and a natural affinity for leading. Opportunities for leading may encourage students to increase their participation or to extend their participation into other sports or recreational opportunities. All students benefit when students with disabilities participate in physical education and sport (Kozub & Porretta, 1996).

This final article of the special feature on inclusion briefly reviews the literature related to leadership in physical education and recreation, exploring definitions of leadership and the programs designed to support leadership development. It also provides ideas for supporting leadership in a range of settings, particularly for students with disabilities. The goal of this article is to broaden common ideas about who gets to lead and to provide strategies to ensure that all students are viewed as future leaders and are given opportunities to practice leadership.

## Leadership in the Literature

Reviewing literature related to leadership and physical activity illuminated the relative scarcity of articles focused specifically on the intersection of the two topics. Gerdes (2001) is one notable exception, specifically addressing how physical activity can be a means “to facilitate leadership education and training” (p. 78). For the most part, however, this article is based on a range of articles about leadership and related skills in schools and on articles that address the ways physical education and recreation can support students’ affective and physical development.

## Defining Leadership

Bisland (2004) noted that one of the problems in leadership education today is the lack of a clear definition (p. 24). In many cases leadership is treated as a group of skills. For example, Karnes & Stephens (1999) recommended teaching self-understanding, conflict-resolution, and problem-solving skills as components of leadership to young children. Another skill that seems to fall under leadership is self-advocacy. Macdonald and Block (2005) reviewed ways to support self-advocacy in physical education for students with disabilities and encouraged teachers to ask students about their preferences and skills. The development of self-advocacy also supports advocacy for the needs of others—which is a part of leadership.

Review of the literature on special education reveals a number of articles that support leadership during the IEP process for individuals with a disability (Martin et al., 2006; Mason, McGahee-Kovac, & Johnson, 2004). Several others support leadership during the transition process (Timmons, Whitney-Thomas, McIntyre, Butterworth, & Allen, 2004; Wood, Karvonen, Test, Browder, & Algozzine, 2004). Lastly, current research supports leadership as a skill that helps students to self-manage the effects of dyslexia (Riddick, 2006), learning disabilities, or emotional disturbances (Myers, 2005). Although these articles are supportive of leadership among children with disabilities, they all promote leadership of the child himself or herself and do not promote leadership amongst peers.

Shaunessy and Karnes (2004) reviewed instruments that are available for measuring leadership. A scale called “Leadership: A Skill and Behavior Scale” measures facets of leadership, including a positive self-concept; communication, decision-making, and problem-solving skills; group dynamics; the capacity for organization, planning, and implementation; and the ability to discern opportunities. A second scale—the Leadership Skills Inventory—identifies the fundamentals of leadership, which are written communication, speech communication, character building, decision making, group dynamics, problem solving, personal development, and planning (Shaunessy & Karnes, 2004).

According to Sather (1999), the five fundamental practices of an exemplary leader are to (1) challenge the process, (2) inspire a shared vision, (3) enable others to act, (4) model the way, and (5) encourage the heart (p. 511). Karnes and Stephens (1999) believe that leadership is both a skill and

an art that must be practiced. They recommend thinking about leadership for children in kindergarten and helping students to develop self-understanding, conflict-resolution skills, and problem-solving skills.

Some leadership qualities are difficult to quantify because of the often abstract conceptualizations of what leadership is. For example, Myers (2005) identified seven steps to follow in order to become a leader others will want to follow: let go of your ego, know what you are asking others to do, build relationships, produce excellent results, do the right thing, make adding value your goal, and give your power away by letting others make decisions. Here, the recommendations to “do the right thing” and “produce excellent results” are difficult to assess.

## Leadership Opportunities

Leadership opportunities for students may be available in educational and recreational settings, but they must be consciously designed. Without explicit emphasis, it is often only by chance that leadership skills are integrated into activity. Given a need to attend to the development of leadership skills, programs and curricula have been designed to provide information about leaders and leadership and opportunities to practice those skills.

Bisland (2004) argued that a separate curriculum for leadership is unnecessary in school. Instead, she described ways to incorporate information about leaders, opportunities to work with others, and games to review biographies of great leaders in the classroom. These ideas need not be limited to children who are labeled gifted, but can be applied to all children. For example, during a fitness or track unit, a discussion of Jean Driscoll, who won the Boston Marathon 8 times and who has spina bifida, will demonstrate leadership for any child who uses a wheelchair. This also impresses upon the able-bodied peers what a person with a disability can do.

Stiehl and Galvan (2005) reported on a “school-based physical activity approach” that could be used in physical education curricula in schools or as an after-school program. Participants were recommended by school staff to participate in the program because they were performing at or below the academic average of the school. Students were asked to participate in experiential activities and activities designed around a responsibility model (see Hellison, 2003, for information on responsibility through physical activity).

Stakeholders for the program included the school personnel, a university, and the city. The school staff functioned as liaisons between the program staff, students, and parents; the university provided facilities and program staff; and the city underwrote the cost through grants and supported logistics such as transportation, snacks, a banquet, certificates, and brochures. This program was designed to promote positive youth development by providing safe spaces and promoting the belief that children are resources to be nourished, not problems to be managed.

Rosenberg, McKeon, and Dinero (1999) described a leadership training program, Positive Peer Groups (PPG), that

believes that “the best way to learn responsibility is to be given responsibility” (p. 23). The 25-week program is structured around work, discipline, and responsibility. Students are selected for the program if they are a “negative leader” (one who is liked for being rebellious), a “rejected isolate” (a child who is often ridiculed), a “neglected isolate” (one who is ignored by peers), or a “positive leader” (a student who is well rounded).

The PPG starts with a kick-off and parent permission for participation. Groups are formed, and a “positive leader” is included in each group. Each group conducts a “needs assessment” and, based on those findings, designs and carries out a “service task,” ending the program with closure activities. This progression is well suited to recreation programs with a clear beginning and ending—perhaps the length of the school year, or a summer session.

In both physical education and recreation programming, it is important to consider how programs are structured and what population is involved, so that students or participants have opportunities to practice leadership.

## Promoting Leadership

Physical education classes and recreation programming can incorporate leadership skills and training for students with disabilities either by reconceptualizing existing activities or by adding new programs specifically designed to support leadership development. Instructors, paraeducators, and administrators must emphasize the proactive use of leadership activities as a way to promote inclusion and positive human development for all students.

Teacher attitudes and beliefs can profoundly influence students (Cook, 2004; Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2000). Often, the major barriers to opportunities for students, including opportunities to lead, are the attitudes and beliefs of the adults around them. How teachers, coaches, and activity directors think about disability may affect what is made available to students with disabilities. If those teachers, coaches, and activity directors think of disability using a negative or deficit model, they may assume that students with disabilities cannot be good leaders. Similarly, students who are not typically viewed as leaders may also be denied opportunities for practice. What is needed is direct practice and instruction in leadership for all students.

One notable aspect of PPG is that students with and without disabilities can be readily included, and students who have not been perceived as leaders are encouraged to develop leadership skills. Promoting leadership within school can occur in simple, concrete ways in general physical education or adapted physical education, and within the community in a range of recreational offerings. Some examples include asking a student to lead a small group activity or to read aloud, choosing a student to be a safety patrol member or bus monitor, or providing peer training in conflict resolution. Examples specific to physical education or recreation include asking a student to be a squad leader, to demonstrate a skill being taught, or to serve as a team captain.

## Creating Opportunities

The purpose of this section is to give the reader concrete ideas on how to promote leadership in K-12 physical education, particularly for students with disabilities. As mentioned earlier, even children without disabilities may have attributes that perpetuate experiences as a “follower.” The following short list highlights some leadership opportunities that can be implemented in physical education for the benefit of all students.

### *Directed Activity Support for Leadership*

- *Rotate squad leaders.* This should be done whether it is for the purposes of attendance, or if the person is leading a relay or activity. Being the squad leader can make any child feel important and valued. The squad leader can be changed each class, weekly, monthly, or by unit. Be consistent and fair in your appointments.

- *Rotate demonstrators.* Typically teachers choose students who are proficient and skilled to demonstrate. They may choose males more often than females and may overlook children with disabilities. It is important to keep in mind that all students should be given an opportunity to demonstrate. Make sure you know that the student understands the skill and do not be afraid to use physical assistance if necessary. It is also important that you ask the child before the selection, as he or she may not feel comfortable demonstrating that specific skill in front of the class.

- *Rotate captains.* When you are working with teams or station groups, give all students opportunities to be captains, or team leaders.

- *Have students take turns managing equipment.* Setting up and cleaning up equipment is often seen as a privilege. Keep in mind that you can use more than one student to help and that physical assistance by the instructor or a paraeducator can be used if necessary.

- *Have students assist in taking attendance.* Taking attendance is often seen as a leader’s job. Children who know the members of the class can take attendance and feel good about helping the teacher.

- *Have students take turns leading the warm-up and cool-down stretches.* Stretching is an inherent part of every physical education class. Leading stretches is a natural way to promote leadership among all students in the class. Be sure to ask the student first and to provide assistance with demonstrations or explanations if necessary.

### *Programmatic Supports for Leadership*

- *Set up personal improvement goals instead of competition* (Kasser & Lytle, 2005). Competition leads to winners and losers. Setting up activities and units around personal improvement promotes success for all students and helps everyone become a better performer.

- *Set up a reciprocal peer-tutor program for students with and without disabilities.* Peer tutors can successfully work with students with disabilities (Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2002). It is important to keep in mind that the tutoring in these situations can be reciprocal. In other words, the student with

the disability can also tutor the peer without a disability. It is important that you monitor the situation to ensure equal instruction and feedback. This kind of shared instruction is an excellent way to promote leadership.

- *Use a sport education model to ensure that each child has opportunities to be a referee, coach, timer, or team owner* (Siedentop, Hastie, & van der Mars, 2004). The sport education model allows students to take on a variety of roles within a game situation. In this model, students can be players, referees, coaches, owners, announcers, or managers. Many of these roles allow the students to practice leadership. A student who is a referee must know the rules and promote them fairly during a game. These roles should be rotated throughout the unit and the academic year so each student can experience different roles.

- *Use a model that supports leadership development.* For example, Project Adventure is a nonprofit group that has designed programs in experiential learning. When teaching Project Adventure there are instances where students can lead team-building activities. It is important that the teacher allow each child to have opportunities to be a leader in these situations. Make sure you discuss their responsibilities before you introduce the activity and offer support as needed.

- *Use activities that are familiar to the student(s) with disabilities.* For example, teachers can introduce a disability sport such as goal ball. This is played wearing a blindfold and includes teams of three people defending one end of a basketball court from a rolling ball with bells inside. Students wear knee and elbow pads and find their location by feeling a rope outline of the court and position markers taped to the floor. Goal ball can be played by anyone, and it allows a student with a visual impairment to participate fully. A second example is to play soccer on a basketball court on scooters. A student with a weak lower body (perhaps due to cerebral palsy) could participate in the game to a degree that may not be possible in a standard running game of soccer. Both activities give the student with a disability a chance to become a leader.

- *Use activities that allow all students to experience competence.* Some examples include wheelchair basketball and beach ball volleyball. Showing all students that there is more than one way to play a game, and that it can be just as much fun, not only allows the instructor to actively include more students in class, but also helps students begin to understand how to modify their own activities at home or on the playground to be more inclusive.

- *Ask students who are unable to actively participate in class to videotape or digitally photograph classmates who they think are doing a good job.* They can share pictures with the teacher and discuss the skill performances they have observed. They could also make a photo page showing the different skills that were highlighted in class. These photos could be added to a bulletin board or a newsletter with recognition to the student.

- *Ask the class for suggestions as to how they might modify*

*a game to make it more fun for everyone.* They often come up with great suggestions and ideas!

- *Use students (both with and without disabilities) as physical education assistants with younger classes to promote leadership and skill reinforcement.* Often older students, particularly at the elementary level, love to “mentor” younger students, who enjoy the attention and extra help.

### **Addressing the Physical Environment**

- *Work to provide playground equipment that is accessible to all students.* For example, play equipment that is accessible to wheelchairs allows children who use wheelchairs to play with peers. Such accessibility includes a wheelchair swing, a surface that is flat and level to encourage children with balance concerns or limb or trunk weaknesses to move onto equipment, and equipment of various heights to accommodate children of different sizes. These design features will support inclusive activities during free play and may encourage less skilled students to initiate activities with others. For more information on accessible play equipment and things to think about when arranging activities, see Thompson, Hudson, and Bowers (2002) and the National Recreation and Park Association ([www.nrpa.org](http://www.nrpa.org)).

### **Summary**

All of the articles in this feature support the inclusion of students with disabilities in recreation and physical education settings. These ideas are useful for all settings, and they support the social and physical engagement of students with disabilities. A natural extension of inclusion should be to increase opportunities for leadership and the development of leadership skills.

As Karnes and Stephens (1999) discussed, leadership is a skill that must be proactively nurtured and practiced. Opportunities for leadership do not just happen on a day-to-day basis if they are not planned. It is important for the development process of all children to include opportunities for leadership in and outside of school. Carefully planned leadership opportunities can promote a positive self-concept and a variety of life skills (Shaunessy & Karnes, 2004). The use of leadership skills among all children can only strengthen an inclusive program. The authors hope that the ideas presented here will help physical educators and recreation professionals to continue providing the leadership opportunities that all children deserve.

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