

HELPING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES PLAY

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In desperation, Ms. Caballero, the after-school activity leader, writes the following note to her supervisor.

Help! What do I do? No matter what game we play or what activity we do, Ricky has difficulty. He doesn't seem to know how to take turns, he doesn't know how to pick up a simple draw card and follow the directions. He doesn't know how to move his marker along the maze on the game board! How can I help Ricky become an active participant playing with the other children rather than a passive bystander watching from the sidelines? I just don't know what to do. Do you have any ideas?

While there is no magical trick that can suddenly make the situation less challenging, there are some things an instructor may do to build community so that all children play together regardless of their physical, sensory, behavioral, or cognitive limitations.

There is a basic approach you can follow that will enable all children to play together and build a cooperative community. The strategies in this approach are based on one basic axiom: All children want to play and be a part of the learning environment. No child wants to feel left out and isolated. This Afterschool Extensions Developer describes a systematic procedure for identifying skill deficits that prevent some children from actively participating with the other children and suggests ways learning supports can be devised and implemented to enable all children to play together. We will use the

example of the game "Candy Land" to illustrate the approach.

MAKE SURE EACH CHILD HAS WHAT HE OR SHE NEEDS TO PARTICIPATE

All children come to an environment with diverse strengths and limitations. A "one size fits all" approach will not provide the supports some children need in order to participate. In short, effective leaders do not treat all children the same. Effective leaders look at each child as an individual and try to provide the supports to enable each child to participate in all activities. In some instances, this may mean a modification of the rules (e.g., Johnny gets four mistakes before he is eliminated; Mary is provided a card shuffler when it is her turn to shuffle the cards).

Afterschool program leaders may use the following process to support student participation:

- Identify the subskill that is difficult for the youngster.
- Based on direct observations, speculate why the student is experiencing difficulty.
- Generate viable supports to help the student provide the correct response.
- Gradually fade out the supports so the youngster no longer depends on it.

It is essential that all children work and play together in a cohesive unit. In cases where children lack the basic skills to play popular traditional games, afterschool program leaders must devise ways to enable them to become active players. "Fair" does not mean treating each child the same, but giving each child what he or she needs to be successful.

IDENTIFY ALL SUBSKILLS NEEDED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ACTIVITY

The skill of taking a complex task, such as playing the “Candy Land” board game, and identifying all the basic subskills needed to successfully complete the task has been labeled “task analysis” in the literature. This can easily be done in a list format by engaging in the complex task yourself while simultaneously listing each skill needed in order for you to complete the task from the beginning to the end. Practicing with simple tasks, such as making a peanut butter sandwich, can be useful before trying to lay out all the steps of a more complex task such as playing a board game. This list enables you, the leader, to determine where a child is having difficulty and where a “support” is needed in order for the child to successfully play the game with the other children.

An example of the subskills required for a child to play “Candy Land” is found in the sidebar on page 48. This information will enable the leader to determine where help is needed to enable the child to participate. Because all children come to the playing arena with differing skills, it is very important to look at each child as an individual to determine what learning supports are necessary.

GENERATE LEARNING SUPPORTS THAT ENABLE THE CHILD TO PARTICIPATE

Learning supports are prompts, guides, or cues that help the learner to perform the subskill. Learning supports should provide just enough assistance to help the learner. Leaders should provide enough assistance to enable the stu-

dent to succeed, but not so much support that the learner is rendered helpless.

All members of the afterschool program can pool their creativeness to generate a device or support that will help the learner overcome the difficulty he or she is experiencing. Often, the best learning supports are generated by the children who are not experiencing difficulty. For example, one idea generated by a group of children suggested adding dotted prompts for letter formation when a student was experiencing difficulty in making a get well card for an ill playmate. The prompts provided just enough assistance to enable the learner to be successful in making a card. Another idea suggested by a group involved the use of cut out manuscript stencils to provide boundaries. Yet another group suggested using strips of glue to make lines on the card to provide a tactual indication of each letter’s shape.

There are an unlimited number of possible supports that can be devised to enable a youngster to participate. Groups are limited only by their own creativity in generating novel approaches. The key is to use a problem solving process that:

- Looks at the specific difficulty the child is having.
- Speculates as to why this is a problem.
- Identifies the types of challenges that are preventing the child from performing the subskill. For example, the “Candy Land” board is composed of a vast maze of treats and candies that are brightly colored. Some children may become overwhelmed or distracted by the vast range of “goodies” displayed and may need the distracters covered by blank cards.
- Identifies viable supports to ensure or increase the probability of the child responding correctly. Skill in generating supports usually comes from practice.

All members of the afterschool program can pool their creativeness to generate a device or support that will help the learner overcome the difficulty he or she is experiencing.

Examples of supports for "Candyland" are found in the sidebar on page 49.

INCORPORATE LEARNING SUPPORTS

Once a learning support has been selected, it must be incorporated into the learning sequence. The use of the learning support may be gradually reduced, if possible, so the youngster is no longer dependent on it. Of course, it is advisable to provide advance warning to the child. For example, "Next time when we play "Candy Land", we are not going to put your picture on your marker, Mary, but I bet you'll be able to remember which marker is yours without the picture."

Guidelines can help in determining which supports will be most useful in a given situation. First, select support that can be eliminated gradually. For example, gradually snipping off greater and greater portions of the photograph attached to a child's marker would probably be preferable to the all or nothing approach where the photograph is there one day and removed the next. Next, try to provide a support that is interactive (a hand spinner rather than an automatic spinner, for example).

The learner should be involved actively in all game activities to the extent possible. Clearly,

a brightly colored or attractively constructed support would have greater appeal to a student than a drab one. An actual miniature car marker that allows students to practice navigating a maze would be superior to a sticker marker or even a plastic car marker that was not constructed to "roll" across the maze pattern, for example. Additionally, the support should provide as little distraction as possible to the other game participants.

Following are criteria to use in selecting a learning support. The criteria are designed to assist in selecting a support that is the least intrusive, yet yields guidance and direction and enables the child to perform the subskill.

- Select a support that can be gradually faded rather than terminated abruptly.
- Select a support that provides enough assistance to facilitate correct responding, but does not provide so much support that it promotes a learned helplessness.
- Select a support that has appeal to the learner and elicits his or her attention.
- Select a support that is generated by the student or by peers.
- Select a support that will provide the least amount of distraction to other game participants.
- Select a support that is easy to construct and incorporate into the activity.

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Assessment Information for "Candyland"

Subskill	Independently	With a Model	With a Verbal Cue	With Physical Assistance
1. Selects marker				
2. Places marker on start				
3. Determines play order				
4. Takes turns				
5. Draws one card from "draw pile"				
6. Moves marker as indicated by draw card: a) If draws colored dot, moves marker to same color as dot on maze b) If draws a candy card, moves marker to specified type of candy on board				
7. If marker lands on a shortcut pass, moves marker across pass				
8. If marker lands on a colored square with a black dot in it, on next turn, moves marker only if a card with the same color is drawn				
9. Discards card in "discard pile"				
10. First child to complete maze says, "I win!"				
11. Continues playing until completes game				
12. Picks up game pieces, puts game away				

Learning Supports for “Candyland”	
Area of Difficulty	Supports
Identifying game marker	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Attach a small photograph of student to marker 2. Put a construction paper strip, the same color as his or her marker, on student’s wrist
Knocking game marker over	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Initially, use large, heavily weighted markers 2. Weight the bottom of the markers with washers, slugs, or coins 3. Attach sticky tack to bottom of marker
Following the maze path from beginning to end	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Practice driving a toy car around the maze from beginning to end 2. Put “stick-on” arrows on the path to cue directionality 3. Simplify the maze on the game board, beginning with a short straight maze, gradually adding curves and swerves
Taking turns	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use pictorial cue cards to visually cue turns 2. Have children pass a crown around circle; each child wears the crown as he or she takes a turn 3. Initially seat students in a straight line for a clear indication as to who is to go next
Drawing the top card	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Make draw cards out of thick cardboard so that only one may be easily drawn 2. Make the draw cards larger for easier drawing 3. Put a green dot on the back of the top card each time preceding card has been drawn
Discarding the card	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have an empty coffee can with a slit in the lid where the children can drop the discard card 2. Place discarded cards in a pile with color side up, so children will know they have already been used
Free moves forward and penalty moves backward	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Insert sticker or arrow on game board to show movement forward or backward 2. Gradually introduce “free move forward” passes after basic game skills are mastered 3. Gradually introduce “penalty moves backward” after basic game skills are mastered
Staying on task for 15-minute periods	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Randomly tape stickers or other incentives on game board maze so that youngsters landing on a box with an incentive will earn it 2. Set a timer and hide it, and if a youngster is on task when timer goes off, he or she earns a reward
Initially maintaining attention by increasing learner participation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Each student has own game board and gets to move his or her marker as the teacher draws the cards 2. Intersperse teacher drawing card where everyone moves simultaneously, with children drawing cards and taking turns
Understanding game sequence (what comes first, next, etc.)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Picture cards depicting each game event are visually depicted in a sequence from beginning to end to guide students’ movements around game board 2. Students shuffle cards and sequence them in order