

Let's Get Physical!

By Carrie Smoot

Like many parents, Joe Maciejczyk of the Richmond area, coaches various youth sports, including YMCA basketball, community swimming and Central Chesterfield Little League Baseball. This four-star NCAA All-American from Louisiana State University started sharing the fun and health benefits of sports and physical activity with his children early. The family's well-stocked game room is a neighborhood kid magnet with a trampoline, air hockey, Fozzball, board games, and video games.

His 13-year-old son, a Junior Olympics champion for two years, is on the autistic spectrum and benefits greatly from participating in all sports. Improving gross motor skills is only one small benefit; building social skills, teamwork and a sense of belonging have been even more important.

"He once had problems with throwing things at people, including rocks," Maciejczyk says. "I wanted to channel the negative energy into something positive. Focus on your child's strengths and build on them." He describes his son's unique interests and abilities. Although his pragmatic language skills are poor, this eighth-grader can tell anyone anything they want to know about history, his favorite school subject. He loves military history and has a keen interest in Pearl Harbor. Boy Scouts has helped with social, independent living and general life skills. He enjoys his school peer mentors who are his friends. "He learns things from them that I wouldn't be able to teach him."

Maciejczyk says the middle school's two physical education classes—each with 130 students and two teachers—are inclusive. His son participates with his class, needing no additional supervision or supports. However, a case manager is on hand to intervene if altercations happen. This arrangement has worked well so far.



Community-based Programs

As a parent and special education advocate, Maciejczyk encourages parents to give inclusive community-based programs a chance, because being with neighborhood and school friends—not just children with disabilities across the county—is so important for children to feel accepted. "It just never occurred to me to put him in sports programs just for children with disabilities," he says. "Regular sports programs felt natural. There's nothing wrong with adaptive programs, and they do have their place. Both are important for children with disabilities. But as a basketball coach, and from observing my own child, children in adaptive programs seem to lag behind in motor development than those in inclusive programs." He says inclusive programs have a low intensity and "must play" rules for everyone, without competition.

Maciejczyk says many parents often fear for their children's safety, keeping them away from all sports programs. Or, once parents discover deficits, they begin removing their children from standard programs. He says there's no need for this, and notes that while he has worked with other kids in sports who are catatonic, have profound ADD/ADHD or are on the autism spectrum, very few children who have other disabilities participate. "Individual sports may improve executive functioning, but children miss out on the fun of being on a team and helping others succeed," he says.

While timing a community swim team last summer, Maciejczyk met a young man with a developmental disability who really enjoyed himself even though he finished the race last, but everyone cheered him on. "The smile on his face when he got out of the pool told the whole story," he recalls. "He had teammates, friends—and he was included...As a country, if we embrace inclusion in our communities, it will eventually lead to inclusion in the workplace."

Family Time

As a family, look for sports and recreation activities that the whole family will enjoy. Encourage your child with a disability to take a class in that activity. Five years ago, the Fairfax County Park Authority enhanced inclusive services by developing a formal program to include children and teens with all types of disabilities in its various sports and recreation classes. "Swimming is by far the most popular," says ADA coordinator Gary Logue, who says the program is successful 95 percent of the time. Over one hundred kids participate in the summer camp program regularly while approximately 18 to 20 kids participate in seasonal classes during the school year.

First, the family contacts the ADA Coordinator to ensure a regular class would be a good fit and to discuss reasonable accommodations. The parent then completes a pre-inclusion survey, and the ADA coordinator develops a written accommodation plan. If the ADA coordinator determines that the skills a leisure coach could offer would be beneficial in implementing the plan, then a coach is assigned to provide short-term support, understanding there is a possibility for independent participation during a given session of classes. The leisure coach then helps the instructor or customer with accommodations such as facilitation techniques, behavior management, activity adaptations or modifications. In some cases, the instructor can make these accommodations without additional staff support. The Fairfax County Park Authority requires at least 10 days notice prior to the class or camp start date in order to effectively provide reasonable accommodations.

"Leisure coaches help and direct the students in social skills, techniques and any other issues that arise," says Logue. "Although most classes average around 10 kids, parents and children need to be aware that leisure coaches are not utilized to provide one- to-one support for an unlimited amount of time. Some kids may not yet have the skill set needed for participation in regular classes, and activities such as adapted swimming, for example, may be more appropriate for a one-on-one support or the lower staff ratio of an adapted gymnastics class."

School Activities

Certainly, no child with a disability is exempted from PE class because of a disability. Many students with disabilities enjoy inclusive classes at their schools along with self-contained opportunities. Now, teachers trained in adaptive PE assist students at several schools along with peer tutors and general PE teachers, keeping safety in mind. Together, it's a happier and more fulfilling experience, not just a school requirement.

"Fitness is not just exercise. It means doing

recreational and sporting activities that you enjoy, and these can take many forms. Especially for children and teens with disabilities, PE should meet the goals of individual students throughout their lives," says Luke Kelly, Ph.D., director of graduate programs in adapted physical education at the University of Virginia. He says PE goals should be built into a student's transition plan. Even before that, he says, parents need to look for these qualities in a PE program:

- a well-defined curriculum taught by a certified teacher in a positive, safe and fun environment;
- students who are actively engaged in the activities;
- students who know what they are learning, and why.

"In adapted PE, teachers are doing more than changing PE activities to build on students' strengths," Kelly says. "They are deciding what skills to teach based on student needs, but are following a set curriculum."

Tom Moran grew up in a small town in New York where a lot of his friends were hooked on soccer. It wasn't long before he loved it too. "It's a great total-body sport," Moran says, who has cerebral palsy and uses a cane. With several years of experience as an adapted physical education teacher in the Charlottesville schools, Moran is pursuing a doctorate in physical education at the University of Virginia. "I want to teach people how to become better PE teachers, especially in adapted physical education," he says. "I tell many general PE teachers that working with a student who has a disability is just like working with any other student. You help them be their best by focusing on their strengths, helping each student fulfill a role in class and on the team."

To share his love of soccer, Moran started the Just for Kicks and SkillsnDrills soccer workshops and week-long camps located in Richmond, Charlottesville and Virginia Beach. With help from volunteers, these activities help children and teens with disabilities aged 3 to 15 work on their soccer techniques so that if they keep practicing, perhaps they will find themselves more comfortable on local teams.

"Many parents don't believe their children can play soccer because it's difficult for them to kick from a wheelchair," Moran says. "We use an omnikin ball (www.omnikin.com) that students can push in front of them. And we use a stand to make kicking easier." He offers the following insight for students, parents and teachers: "We all face barriers, but try not to view them as insurmountable walls, but hurdles to be jumped over."

Like all teachers, adapted PE teachers must be creative. But sometimes they do feel stumped. "There's a lot of trial and error. You try things, and they may or may not work. Sometimes brainstorming with the

general PE teachers, peer tutors and parents help," says Jillian Hornbaker, a Loudoun County adapted PE teacher. Offering bowling, T-ball, putt-putt golf, shuffleboard, basketball, badminton, tennis and volleyball—all activities that are easily modified by using smaller racquets, bigger game pieces, and other equipment, Hornbaker teaches lifetime and leisure skills to students who have a range of disabilities. Her goal is to help them with skills so that they'll be able to play the games independently. She uses the weight room and free weights with her students, along with teaching some basic fitness skills.

"They did really well with lacrosse," she says. "I was surprised, because this sport is harder to adapt than others. I used the equipment we had available." Hornbaker says many parents don't realize what their children can do, so from horseshoes to basketball to bowling, she will try to help them work on activities they can do with their families.

David Blevins, an adapted PE teacher at Metz Middle School in Manassas, motivates his students through music accompanying the class activities. "You determine the students' individual levels of ability and help them hone their skills," he says. For instance, he'll have a student with poor balance work on the specific skill next to a wall for support. He is constantly modifying and encouraging.

Blevins would like to see more parents involved with the physical education section of the IEP, following up on paperwork. While parents are most concerned about academic performance, he says physical education is equally important.

Many adapted PE teachers have discovered that the local community is usually welcoming to students with disabilities. Heather Landes describes many things her students have done in the Roanoke City Public Schools. In addition to standard sports and activities that promote motor skills development, some students enjoy swimming and track and field. The area has a fishing rodeo, so they have had a fishing unit, learning how to cast lines and manipulate rods and reels. Two of her schools have a rock-climbing wall, so some students have gotten the feel of climbing. She has taken students to the local roller-skating and ice skating rinks to work on balance. Some students glide on wheeled therapy boards, or feel the movement of the skates. Dances are popular with the elementary school crowd.

"Inclusive physical education is good for everyone," Landes says. "The kids in general PE are learning about adaptations and why they are made. They enjoy assisting the students with special needs and maintain a positive attitude during the activities. They have learned

by interacting with students with special needs that there is more to sports than just winning."

Andrea Taliaferro, a K-12 adapted PE teacher in Albemarle County, helps students at every grade level reach their individual physical potential according to IEP goals. "At the elementary and middle school levels, students are working on specific skills like underhanded throws, dribbling a basketball and other techniques. At this stage, kids are setting short-term and long-term goals and working closely with peer tutors in the class," she says. "I really think the general education students benefit from inclusion in PE as well, as they are always excited to help their peers who have disabilities and participate in activities with them."

Taliaferro says high school students tend to concentrate on enjoyable lifetime recreational activities. One student is working on muscle strength and flexibility through universal weight training. The student's family enjoys going to a gym, and he wanted to participate as well. Other students enjoyed their visit to a Curves fitness center. They also liked putt-putt golf and showing their stuff on an accessible driving range. The opportunities, she says, are endless. ■

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Resources

YMCA • www.ymca.net

Little League Baseball • www.littleleague.org

Junior Olympics • www.aaujrogaes.org

National Disability Sports Alliance
• www.ndsaonline.org

SkillsnDrills and Just for Kicks
• www.skillsndrills.com

DisabledSportsUSA
• www.disabledsportsusa.org

Fairfax County Park Authority
• www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/ada.htm

Henrico County Recreation and Parks
• www.co.henrico.va.us

Chesterfield County Recreation and Parks
• www.chesterfield.gov/HumanServices/ParksandRecreation/parksites.asp

National Center on Physical Activity and Disability • www.ncpad.org

American Association of Adapted Sports Programs
• www.aaasp.org