



# Inclusion Tools for After School Professionals

## SNIPPET # 9 Building Supportive OST Communities Part 2: Talking to Children About Disability

### **Part 1: Why Talk about Disability?**

As we learned in Part 1 of this series, OST providers and program staff have a unique opportunity to build trusting relationships with children and youth, and help create communities where children feel safe and respected. This role also allows OST staff to share information, act as role models and hopefully help shape the opinions of students attending programs.

### **What is disability?**

Disability is a natural part of human existence. Ten percent of the population will have a disability at any point in time. You can be born with a disability, but you can also acquire one through an accident, illness or aging.

The word “disability” usually refers to a specific medical condition, for example Down syndrome or ADHD. All disabilities have a range of severity and therefore a range of impacts. The name of the disability or the label gives us very little information about a child.

Disability can be redefined as “a body part that works differently”. Disability is just another example of diversity in our community, to be recognized, under-

stood and welcomed.

### **Why should I talk about disability?**

As educators, part of our role is to teach children about civil rights issues. We’ve likely had conversations with students about other civil rights issues, but did you realize that disability is also a civil rights issue? The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal civil rights law that protects individuals with disabilities from discrimination. Under the ADA, agencies such as OST and recreation programs, as well as other public accommodations and transportation are prohibited from discriminating against people with disabilities. The ADA also requires that programs ensure they are accessible to all people by making reasonable accommodations to allow people with disabilities to participate.

In an ideal world, children with disabilities would be welcomed into any environment and able to participate as freely as their peers are. Programs would be developed so they were accessible to all, and children and youth with disabilities wouldn’t be viewed as “special” or “different”. OST staff can strive to achieve this in our programs, and teach

children to be welcoming and accepting of all people.

Building a sense of community within your program, where all students are treated as valued individuals with respect and dignity, satisfies many of the California After-School Quality Self-Assessment tool indicators and some of the After School for All Core Competencies for staff. These are the indicators of high quality OST programs in general.

In particular, the topics discussed below address core competencies and quality assessment indicators which require programs to promote a peaceful environment by using strategies and interventions for addressing violence, negative comments and/or harassment, and which require that program activities, events and the environment show an understanding of and respect for the cultures of the program participants.

### **How do we learn about disability?**

As children, we probably first learned about disability from things we saw or heard in our environment. Positive and negative stereotypes are passed along easily this way. We might have seen someone in a wheelchair and were told, “Don’t stare!” and never heard anything else. Or, we might have heard an adult say “Poor Ana, her daughter has been born ‘slow’ and Ana will have to look after her forever.” Often, negative stereotypes are based on a fear of the unknown, inadequate or incorrect information, or a lack of experience. We are usually more comfortable with a disability with which we are familiar. For both adults and children, familiarity and information lead to comfort and understanding.

### **The role of OST programs and staff**

OST staff have a unique opportunity to share information and shape opinions in a caring and positive way. To do this, as educators we need to be aware of our own feelings and values about disability as our perceptions can significantly affect the children in our programs. Think about what your experience of disability has been. Do you know anyone who has a disability personally? Were there children at your school who had disabilities? Were they placed in different classrooms? Were you encouraged to interact with them? What information did you learn about these children? What did you think of them? When you’ve reflected on what your experience and perception of disability has been, think about what experiences you’d like the children in your program to have.

It is also the role of all educators to recognize that all students, with and without disabilities, are learners with great potential.

## So what can we do?

1. **Use person-first language.** Remember that having a disability does not define a person. We should try and talk about what a person *has* and not what a person *is*. For example, a child may have autism or have a learning disability, but they are not “autistic” or “disabled”. They are also fun or energetic or helpful or caring.
2. **Use language that celebrates people’s abilities and strengths.** Recognize that all children have particular strengths and skills: A child may have a great memory, lots of energy, good rhythm or great concentration skills. Avoid talking about what a child can’t do or their problems, for example with statements like, “She can’t see small fonts,” or “He has behavior problems.” Talk about what we can do to support their needs, such as, “She benefits from large print text,” or “Extra time for transitions helps him to follow instructions.”
3. **Celebrate diversity.** Help children to realize how boring it would be if everyone and everything were the same. Encourage children to look at their families, friends and classmates and celebrate their unique skills and talents.
4. **Find similarities.** Encourage children and youth to realize they are more similar than they are different. Identify common interests and characteristics. Perhaps they like the same artist or musician, football team or movie. They might go the same church, celebrate the same holidays or like the same food.
5. **Include media, toys and activities that portray diversity.** Does your program have toys or books available that portray a variety of cultures, languages and abilities available for students? Are people with disabilities portrayed in an appropriate and positive way?
6. **Make accommodations available to everyone.** If you are introducing accommodations like fidgets, homework corrals, visual supports, homework checklists or fatter markers for a student, make them available to everyone. This will prevent the accommodations being seen as special or different. You’ll probably find that most children will be curious initially, but this interest will decrease until only the children who benefit from them are using them. You’ll also probably find that there are more children in your program who benefit from them than you thought!
7. **Reflect on your own behavior.** Think about how your words and actions can set an example for all children. Do you praise all the children’s artwork, including those who may paint just spots or scribble? Do you assist children who might be slower at a task just to make it quicker? Do you celebrate all students’ attempts and achievements, no matter how small? Think about what impression your words and actions can have on the students in the group.

8. **Treat all children equally.** Just like you do with any child in your program, initiate interactions with children who have disabilities, adapt activities so they can participate, and give them roles within the program. Value them as contributing members of the group, and make sure their peers see you value them.
9. **Respect confidentiality.** It is important for OST staff to maintain the confidentiality of each of the children in the program. They are not allowed to share information, such as disability or diagnosis, medical information or history without the specific consent of a child's parent or guardian. If you haven't seen it already, ask your program director for a copy of your program's confidentiality policy.

### **What we've learned**

Talking about disability helps OST program staff teach children to be welcoming of all people. The way we talk about disability matters: recognizing children's strengths, making accommodations available to everyone and treating all children equally set an example of respect and demonstrate that we value diversity in our programs. By finding similarities and celebrating strengths, we are able to build trust and create a sense of community in our programs so that all children can thrive.

### **References & Other Resources:**

More information on person-first language: <http://www.csun.edu/~ffrc/person1st.html>

Adapted from [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

For more information on the ADA & OST programs, see the Child Care Law Center fact sheet: <http://www.childcarelaw.org/docs/ADA%20and%20OST%20Providers%20final.pdf>

DCYF minimum standards for OST programs in San Francisco: <http://www.dcyf.org/WorkArea/showcontent.aspx?id=4196>

AFA Core Competencies: <http://sfafterschoolforall.blogspot.com>

California After-School Quality Self-Assessment Tool (PDF): [http://www.afterschoolnetwork.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/qsatool\\_0.pdf](http://www.afterschoolnetwork.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/qsatool_0.pdf)

## **Part 2: How to talk to children about disability**

As we've started to build community and to think of disability as another example of diversity within our programs, it is inevitable that children will want to talk about and ask questions about their peers. Then what do we do?

### **How come? Why does he? Why don't I?**

Children and youth are naturally curious, and when they ask questions or make comments, they are very good at saying exactly what they are thinking. As educators, it's our job to provide them with accurate information and model appropriate language for them. When it comes to sensitive or unfamiliar topics like disability, educators often don't know where to begin to teach children.

### **Why do children say that?**

If the children in your program are asking questions of program staff, it's a great sign that they trust you and are interested in their environment. From a very young age, children begin to identify and comment on differences (e.g.: "Mommy, why don't you have a beard?"). From ages five to eight, children begin to make judgments about the similarities and differences they observe. Things become "favorites" or the "worst thing ever"; first and last become important; they make best friends and they exclude other children, sometimes because of differences such as race or ability.

Thinking of children's and youths' questions or comments as teachable moments allows us as educators the opportunity to inform, shape values and guide children to contribute to a just and inclusive community. It also provides children the opportunity to practice skills to help them think through more complicated social problems.

### **What do I say?**

A great beginning is **to understand why children ask questions or make comments**. Are they looking for information? Are they feeling uncomfortable about something that is new or unfamiliar? Do they think something is unfair? The more we know about why the children in our programs ask questions or make comments, the better equipped we will be to help them find answers or responses that are meaningful.

**Remember that questions are OK.** Try to answer children's questions honestly, simply and clearly, without any shock or anger. Children do not need long and detailed information about chromosomes or accidents; a simple statement about how "Lisa speaks in a way that's different, and that's ok," will often be enough. Following up with some information about similarities ("I know you both love Glee") or a suggestion to encourage interaction (e.g.: "Lisa is great with beads, why don't you make something together?") is a great way to encourage interaction.

Remember **it's ok to tell a child you don't know the answer** to their questions, and tell them you will think about it and come back to them (make sure you do!). Give yourself time to find accurate information, prepare a response that's appropriate for the age range, or rehearse wording with a colleague.

Wherever possible throughout your program, **reinforce that differences are not weird, they are normal and ok.** Use language like: "Tyrone likes to build tall towers with the blocks, Freddie likes to make a long shape; that's ok." "Kevin uses both hands to catch the ball, Leo uses one; that's ok." "Thomas likes to sing and shout, Rhianna doesn't like loud noises; that's ok."

**When introducing accommodations, make them available to everyone.** Explain how an accommodation might make it easier for some people to concentrate, draw or do their homework. Remind children that accommodations are not toys or games, but tools to help some people learn (e.g.: "These fidgets help some people to concentrate, why don't you try it and see if it helps you?"). You'll probably find that most children will be curious initially, but their interest will decrease until only the children who benefit from accommodations are using them.

Other pieces of equipment like wheelchairs or communication devices are specific to a person and shouldn't be shared. **Explain simply** that the child's body part, like their legs, eyes or ears, work differently and the equipment helps them to walk, see or hear. Inform children that the piece of equipment is just for that child, just like a pair of glasses are made just for one person.

**Maintain confidentiality.** When talking about any child in your program, OST staff need to remember they are responsible for maintaining the confidentiality of each of the children in the program, and they are not allowed to share information, such as disability or diagnosis, medical information or history without the specific consent of a child's parent or guardian. If you haven't seen it already, ask your program director for a copy of your programs confidentiality policy.

## What about specific questions?

Here are some examples of questions children may ask, with a possible response. Think about other responses you could give when you next hear these questions.

**Question:** “What’s wrong with him?”

**Answer:** *“Nothing is wrong with him. His legs or brain work differently, or he learns or communicates differently.”*

**Question:** “Why do they get...(special seat, fidget, extra time)?”

**Answer:** *“Having a special seat during homework time helps Jay to concentrate on his homework. Do you have something that helps you to concentrate?” or “Jay’s brain works differently sometimes so having extra time to finish his test helps him.”*

**Question:** “How come you’re helping her with her work?”

**Answer:** *“I’m here to help anyone who’d like some help with their work. If you’d like some help, you can ask me or one of the other adults.”* If this is something that is being asked a lot, or a child benefits from more intensive support, you could say, *“Our brains all learn things differently, and sometimes it takes some help or a little extra time for us to learn new things.”*

**Question:** “How come I don’t get to go with you?”

**Answer:** *“It’s Lucy’s turn to come and do some activities with me. Would you like a turn sometime?”* A child who asks repeatedly about children having one-on-one time with an adult may be looking for more individual attention. Try to find ways to spend some time with this child in particular, or invite them to do some fun activities with Lucy.

**Question:** “How come he’s doing baby homework? I did that last year!”

**Answer:** *“He is learning different things in his classroom, so his math homework looks a little different; that’s ok,” or “Sometimes people learn things differently or at different speeds; that’s ok. Maybe you can help him with his homework?”*

**Question:** “Isn’t it sad that he needs to use a wheelchair?”

**Answer:** *“I don’t think it’s sad, I think it’s great that the wheelchair was invented, now Todd can play soccer with you!”*

### **What about if an adult asks a question?**

Often it's not children who ask us questions, but parents of other children who attend a program. Occasionally a parent might ask, "What's wrong with Jose? Does he have a disability or something?" OST program staff need to remember that maintaining confidentiality is just as important when talking to adults. You could say something like, "I need to keep all children's information confidential. I can't talk about students without their parents' consent." This will let the parent know that you are keeping this child's information safe, just like you would any other child's. You could also use this as a teachable moment for the adult, making a comment about the child's strengths using person-first language, for example, "Jose is really great at organizing the games for us".

### **What we've learned**

Giving students accurate information and modeling appropriate language is a key part of creating community in our programs. Children and youth are naturally curious, and their questions and comments are often opportunities to create teachable moments. When educators respond in a thoughtful and appropriate way to their questions, we reinforce the importance of diversity in our programs and send the strong message that every child is a valued member of our community.