

Kids Gotta Move: Adapting Movement Experiences for Children with Differing Abilities

by Carol S. Kranowitz

Birds gotta sing, fish gotta swim, and kids gotta MOVE AND TOUCH. Moving and touching are how children first learn about the world. Feeling the sun and grass on their skin, throwing and catching balls, stretching their arms to the ceiling, climbing jungle gyms, and running in great circles are examples of ways that children gain the important information they require to function well. Nature's plan is for young children to absorb sensory knowledge through their skin, muscles, and joints as a foundation for more complex learning.

Typical children move and touch easily. Children with differing abilities, however, often avoid gross motor experiences, although they need them most.

Various reasons may cause this avoidance. Conditions like cerebral palsy or spina bifida may prevent them from moving easily. Subtle problems with motor coordination may make them clumsy. A poor sense of balance may make them feel tipsy. An inability to interpret sounds, sights, touch sensations, or other people's rapid motions may cause them to withdraw from movement experiences.

How can we help children with differences join in the fun and gain the movement experiences they need?

- We can *observe* them to discover their strengths and learning styles.
- Because teachers see children differently, we can *brainstorm* to uncover what activities they crave or avoid in various situations. For instance, some children will prefer outdoor to indoor activities, or small group to large group activities. Some will try

new experiences only with a favorite teacher nearby. Some will move better in the morning, when they are fresh, or in the afternoon, after warming up.

- We can *adapt* movement experiences to meet their individual needs.
- We can be *flexible* — especially when they are not.

Let's look at examples of children, their difficulties, and the adaptations that teachers have found for atypical children at St. Columba's Nursery School in Washington, DC. These adaptations are generalizable to other children in many situations.

Child/Difficulty: Ned has spina bifida. Paralyzed below the waist, he requires canes and heavy leg braces to walk.

Adaptations: Ned's inner drive to move is intense. To let him enjoy swinging without the danger of falling, the school has purchased a safety bucket swing seat. To let him experience sledding, a teacher sits on a plastic saucer, puts him on her lap, and slides with him down the snowy hill.

When his group enacts "The Three Billy Goats Gruff," Ned wants to be the Big Goat, but cannot climb the aluminum ladder to trip-trop across the bridge. A teacher with a strong back lifts him to the bridge, and he pulls himself across in a sitting position, making booming sounds with his braces.

His pleasure in participating in motor activities is so great that other children want to swing, sled, and trip-trop "just like Ned." Thus, the adaptations that



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the teachers make are not only therapeutic, but also instrumental in helping him socialize with his peers.

Child/Difficulty: Leticia, legally blind, is reluctant to move.

Adaptation: Discovering that she can discern bright, shiny objects, teachers stick strips of metallic duct tape at eye level on the walls and floor. Soon Leticia is able to find her way to the classroom, bathroom, and playground. Her growing independence in getting from place to place makes her feel more adventurous. The more she moves, the more she can move.

Child/Difficulty: Jody has difficulty coordinating both sides of his body. Teaming his hands, arms, legs, or eyes to work together is hard. He avoids movement activities requiring bilateral coordination, like riding tricycles, keeping a beat with rhythm sticks, and catching and throwing balls.

Adaptation: The teachers replace the standard playground ball with a huge, colorful beach ball that is easier for Jody to watch and catch. He tastes success and begins to participate in other movement activities.

Child/Difficulty: Manuel has emotional problems. He responds to the presence of other children by crouching in a corner and shouting, "Go away!" Only when he feels unthreatened can he run, jump, balance, swing, and climb.

Adaptation: The teachers devise a plan to offer him the movement experiences he craves. They take turns spending a few moments alone with him after his classmates have left the playground. He welcomes the chance to move freely, without being distracted by other children. When he comes indoors, he is calmer and more able to interact.

Child/Difficulty: Connor has tactile defensiveness. Because touching or being touched frightens him, he reacts to ordinary touch sensations with flight-or-fight responses. Connor avoids playground equipment like swings, trikes, seesaws, and monkey bars because he cannot tolerate handling them.

Adaptations: The teachers notice that although Connor avoids touching objects with his hands, he enjoys movement experiences like running, balancing, kicking, and jumping. Thus, they inaugurate the "Mini-Olympics" with events designed to engage him. One teacher chalks a racetrack on the blacktop

so Connor can run in his individual lane without the threat of bumping into other athletes. Another teacher supervises the seesaw and invites the children, one by one, to walk across. Another teacher hauls out a trampoline and stands guard while each child jumps. The Mini-Olympics include broad jumps and ball kicking events as well. Connor gets a workout!

Child/Difficulty: Bo has vestibular/proprioceptive dysfunction, a neurological problem affecting his ability to process sensations from gravity, movement, and his own muscles and joints. Unable to maintain his balance, Bo falls frequently and has trouble regaining an upright position. Bo also has trouble with motor planning, the ability to plan and execute a movement in a smooth sequence. Although he can crawl into the big concrete pipe in the sandbox, getting out is difficult. Because moving is difficult and scary, he spends most of his time lying down, lost in his own world.

Adaptations: At circle time, the teacher provides everybody with a one-legged T-stool. (To make a T-stool, take two pieces of 2" x 4" wood, each piece about 12" in length, and screw them together into a "T" shape.) Sitting on an unstable T-stool requires balancing, no easy task for Bo; but when he masters it, his posture and attentiveness immediately improve.

To provide Bo with motor planning experiences, the school invests in a large barrel made of thick foam. Holding the barrel upright, a teacher instructs Bo, step by step, how to climb onto a chair, grab the lip of the barrel, lift one leg, and slide in. Bo is delighted with his success! The teacher gently tips the barrel onto its side, and, after many repetitions, Bo learns how to crawl out, all by himself.

Child/Difficulty: Andrea's fine and gross motor skills are excellent. She moves gracefully, plays beautifully with others, and is particularly creative with playdough, markers, and small manipulative toys. However, she avoids activities like jumping into leaf piles, digging in the sandbox, and sloshing through puddles. "No," she says tearfully, "I can't do that."

What is her problem?

Her babysitter! Her babysitter insists that Andrea stay clean, warning her every morning to "play like a young lady and stay away from dirt."



Since 1976, Carol Kranowitz has been the music and movement teacher at St. Columba's Nursery School in Washington, DC.

○ **Adaptations:** The teachers find ways for Andrea to enjoy activities that will satisfy her yearning to move without making her fearful of her caregiver's disapproval. They staple crepe paper streamers to long cardboard tubes so that Andrea may run with the wind. They provide her with hoops to roll across the blacktop. They assure her that swinging, sliding, jumping on the trampoline, and pedaling tricycles will not soil her clothes. Indoors, Andrea dances with silk scarves, moves through obstacle courses, and plays "Ring Around the Rosy." The teachers help Andrea balance her two worlds so that she can participate in the gross motor activities she loves without causing her emotional stress.

Child/Difficulty: Joe has an auditory processing problem. Following directions, listening to stories, asking and answering questions, and communicating with his peers are difficult. Joe is a silent, inflexible child who seeks to control people and objects.

Joe's strengths are his gross motor and visual skills. He likes working puzzles, building with blocks, and rearranging equipment, indoors and out. However, he cannot verbally express his ideas or needs and becomes easily frustrated when things don't go his way.

○ **Adaptations:** The teachers give Joe opportunities to express himself through movement. One teacher organizes a "Follow the Leader" game. When Joe's turn comes, he leads the children creatively and successfully, up, down, through, and around the playground equipment.

Another teacher invites him to help her plan an obstacle course, saying, "Show me how you'd plan it." Joe arranges the canvas tunnel, balance beam, foam barrel, gym mats, wooden ramps, and A-frame ladders. He tests his design, makes adjustments, and nods with satisfaction. The obstacle course is completely different from the teacher's plan. She says, "Wonderful!"

Joe hears her — and beams.

○ Kids gotta move and touch. Let's observe, brainstorm, make adaptations, and be flexible so that active play works for every child!