

# Using Creative Dramatics to Include All Children

by Kirsten Haugen

Imagine your kindergartners have been reading folk tales about Anansi the Spider, a trickster hero from West Africa. You've watched an Anansi story on video, learned about real spiders, sung spider songs, and made spiders of all shapes, colors, and sizes using found materials. As a culminating event, the children have chosen the story of Anansi and his children to perform as a play for all the families at the center. But now you're in a quandary: one of your kindergartners uses a wheelchair and cannot speak. How will Rory participate in the all-class play?

## Prepare an Accessible Environment

As you create opportunities for creative dramatics in your program, the thoughtfulness you put into accommodating children with disabilities will benefit all the children.

- **Gross motor support.** Provide stable furnishings that won't tip and sufficient space without obstacles. Children can often use scooter boards, adapted tricycles, and pedal cars as alternative ways to get around. Consult a physical therapist beforehand if you want a child with physical disabilities to "try new things."
- **Fine motor support.** Include costumes and props that are simpler to use; try large knobs, handles and switches, and easy-to-fasten alternatives to buttons. Lightweight props can be made of Styrofoam™. Also available are battery-operated puppet stands that spin or rock with the touch of a switch.
- **Visual support.** Help children with visual impairments know when, where, and how to participate by giving hands-on narrated "tours" of objects in the environment beforehand, and provide an ongoing commentary during activities. Keep the environment organized, use high contrasts in colors and textures, and provide good lighting, so children with poor vision can easily find things.
- **Communication support.** Provide rich photos and pictures to spark ideas for dramatic play; put the pictures in "windows" with curtains to lift and peek; label the environment with words, words, words. When you

speak, remember to face children with hearing impairments or auditory processing difficulties. Incorporate sign language and captioned pictures into songs and games. Consider adapted tape recorders, talking photo frames, or special voice output devices that play back one or more messages which a peer can record beforehand.

- **Behavioral support.** Keep background noise and distractions to a minimum; work in smaller groups; pre-teach challenging skills in a step-by-step fashion; allow for breaks from a group activity.
- **Creative costuming.** Special equipment can be a bonus rather than a burden — use cardboard, poster paint, and imagination to build a bus, a bulldozer, or a bakery right around a child's wheelchair.

## Support Participation

Welcome diversity in terms of how children perceive of and participate in creative dramatics. Creative dramatics can include speaking, dancing, singing, playing instruments, providing sound effects, pantomime, puppetry, creating sets, costumes and scenery, operating curtains, controlling lights, designing programs, and more. If you put on a performance, be sure to acknowledge all forms of participation equally. In addition, try these specific strategies to enable all children to participate:

- Observe how each child participates in free play and other activities so you can provide dramatic roles that match their skills and interests.



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- Trust your own imagination and creativity . . . and ask other teachers and parents for ideas.
- Ask the children to brainstorm ideas and strategies. Children often come up with unique and practical solutions for including their peers in all kinds of activities.
- Teach children with special needs a new story, activity, or skill beforehand so they are already “experts” when the whole group joins in.
- Provide partners. Match children with different skills so that together they can accomplish a task. One child can move the puppet while the other speaks the lines.
- Sometimes a child’s special equipment can provide unique opportunities for roles, costumes, etc.
- Provide ample time to prepare, explore, and practice. Your first attempts to include a child with differences may not work as planned, or a child with special needs may need additional exposure to materials and activities.
- Above all, have fun with the “fuzzy lines” between drama, pretend play, art, dance, literature, block play, and more.

### “People First” Language and Images

You can include children with disabilities in creative dramatics, portray characters with disabilities in your dramatic productions (and in books, posters, etc.), use creative dramatics to stimulate thinking about people with disabilities, and provide dolls or props such as wheelchairs, mobility canes, or braces in your dramatic play areas. It is important in each case that you model positive, appropriate language and images about people with disabilities.

- Emphasize people first, disabilities second. Say “a child with Down syndrome” or “a teacher with cerebral palsy” instead of “a Down child” or “a palsied teacher.”
- Emphasize abilities. Say “Becky uses a wheelchair,” instead of “Becky is confined to a wheelchair.”
- Emphasize practical needs instead of stereotypes. Say “Brian is blind, so he’s had to learn how to pay extra attention to where sounds come from” instead of “Blind people have such a special sense of hearing.”
- Answer questions about disabilities directly and honestly, in positive and practical terms. “No, Emily can’t talk yet, but have you noticed how she looks at you and then at what she wants, and smiles or frowns to tell you how she feels?”
- Portray people with disabilities in active, leadership positions rather than passive roles. You need not look far — people with disabilities run companies and non-profits, play sports, work in universities and research facilities, and perform in dance companies and theater troupes.
- Learn from your children. I once overheard a kindergarten say, “Hey Jen, I’ll push your wheelchair if you carry my library books.”

### Back to Rory and the Class Play

Now it’s time to think how you might include Rory in the class play. Will he sit in the audience, or will he operate the lights or music? Hold up posters to go with the narration? Speak his lines using a voice output device? Play his part with an adapted puppet? Use his power wheelchair to move sets across the stage? Once you begin to imagine the possibilities, the challenge may come down to which role to choose.

### Resources for Including Children With Disabilities in Creative Dramatics

**Accessible Arts** newsletter — available from 1100 State Avenue, Kansas City, KS 66102-4411, (913) 281-1133, fax (913) 281-1515 (e-mail, [accarts@hotmail.com](mailto:accarts@hotmail.com)).

**Americans for the Arts** provides links to web sites on the arts for children birth to age 8 — 1000 Vermont Avenue NW, 12th floor, Washington, DC 20005, (202) 371-2830, fax (202) 371-0424 ([www.artsusa.org](http://www.artsusa.org)).

**AssisTech, Inc.** makes adapted puppetry stands and related materials — PO Box 137, Stow, NY 14785, (888) ASISTEK, (716) 789-4197, fax (716) 789-4644 ([www.assisttech.com](http://www.assisttech.com)).

**The Bridge School’s** web site has creative ideas and instructions for costumes for kids who use wheelchairs — 545 Eucalyptus Avenue, Hillsborough, CA 94010, (650) 696-7295 ([www.bridgeschool.org/about/about\\_halloween.html](http://www.bridgeschool.org/about/about_halloween.html)).

**Creative Communicating** provides story-time ideas to encourage participation, language, and literacy in children with developmental delays and language disabilities — PO Box 3358, Park City, UT 84060, (435) 645-7737, fax (435) 658-0925 ([www.creative-comm.com](http://www.creative-comm.com)).

**Linda J. Burkhardt** shows how to make a communication device from a talking photo frame — 6201 Candle Court, Eldersburg, MD 21784, (410) 795-4561 ([www.lburkhart.com/pframe.htm](http://www.lburkhart.com/pframe.htm)).

**Toys for Special Children** provides simple voice output devices, ability switches, adapted toys, musical instruments, and more — 385 Warburton Avenue, Hastings-on-Hudson, NY 10706, (800) 832-8697, (914) 478-0960, fax (914) 478-7030 ([www.enablingdevices.com](http://www.enablingdevices.com)).

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