

Differentiation Guidance

There are a variety of reasons that an activity may need to be adapted based on a participant's needs. Sometimes these moments are glaringly obvious and other times they only come about because you know your group so well. On the other side of things, sometimes it's an invisible need that someone must advocate for. In this Differentiation Guidance resource, we offer techniques for differentiation based on common needs to supplement standard activities that are offered through a curriculum.

Behavioral Needs

Not everyone's behavior is something that they have control over. Sometimes adaptation is needed because a group or individual has a different amount of energy than the activity calls for.

- The first strategy to address behavior on an individual or small group scale is to use proximity to your advantage. Move closer to the undesirable behavior and continue teaching.
- For those with higher energy, give a specific role that requires more hands-on participation to keep the individual occupied physically and mentally.
- For those with lower energy, try working parallel to them and pointing out aspects of their participation that is going well. "I wouldn't have thought to use that sticker" or similar statements can increase involvement.

Anxiety/Mental Health Needs

A mental block—a temporary difficulty being able to remember or think of something—can happen for many reasons. If you notice participants are struggling with an activity because of something that looks like nerves, there may be something triggering them that you are unaware of.

- When possible, identify the trigger or reason for the mental block. Remove it as you are able or offer an alternative.
- You can address performance anxiety by modeling the activity first and then talking through it with a group.
- Avoid phrasing such as "it's easy" or "you know how to do it." Validate the anxiety with statements like "while this seems scary, I find it helpful to ____."

Physical Needs

Your participants may have various physical needs that you are not aware of (and some that are more obvious). If a participant shares that they cannot participate due to a physical need, consider these options to adapt the activity.

- Most standing activities can become sitting activities. Offer chairs to keep everyone level or if participants are able, sitting on the ground is an option in most spaces. Having some sit while others stand is an option, but it may not allow for fair play or access to the activity.
- Injuries (broken bones, sprains, large injuries, etc.) shouldn't stop someone from participating. Offer an alternative role such as timekeeper, line judge, or score counter to keep all participants active.
- Even the playing field by making races or speed-based activities done using goofy movements. For example, everyone walks in a grapevine or army crawls to make the challenge manageable for someone with balance struggles.

Sensory Needs

Textures, sounds, lights, or a combination of these things may be overwhelming to individuals. It is always an option to trade out materials for something less aversive or change the environmental characteristics of your space.

- Activities that use certain materials may need replacement. Substitute modelling clay for

playdough, puff balls for cotton balls, and ribbon for yarn.

- Experiment with volume and the level of light in order to best accommodate the needs of those in your group.
- Water activities are often aversive to those with sensory issues. Consider dry alternatives or using spray bottles instead of open water containers.

Grouping

Group dynamics and numbers aren't always playing in our favor. Luckily, small changes can be made to make individual projects into group activities, or vice versa!

- Any individual project can become a group project by inviting people to work together. Instead of one person bringing it home, consider it being used for display or donation instead.
- Consider random group assignments, but with a preferred peer. Have people partner up and then assign partners a group to join.
- Drawing popsicle sticks, cards, or colored straws can allow individuals to trade to be in groups with trusted people or accept random grouping.

Things to Consider

- Not all individuals have the same needs. Differentiation is likely going to look different in each situation. Have a conversation with the individual, or someone they are close to, about what considerations should be made when planning for them.
 - Just because someone has a diagnosis, disability, or difference does not mean that differentiation is needed.
 - If you are not aware of a need, and that information is not offered, you are not responsible for accommodating/differentiating.
- Sometimes needs are abundant and multiple factors need differentiation. It is okay to adapt in ways that are workable for the majority of the group and give individuals the differentiation they need. It is not possible to adapt to every single need/preference every single time; you can only do your best to accommodate.
 - You can always do an Internet search or partner with a local special education teacher to help your specific needs.
- You may notice someone needs something different but not be sure what exactly needs to be adapted. Start small and adapt using a trial-and-error method for different factors that can be manipulated.
- Be aware of allergies or aversions to materials when substituting for an undesirable sensory factor. This is something to consider for snack and food-related activities as well.

About the Writer

Elaine Seekon is an educator by trade and passion, licensed in Special Education areas of Emotional Behavior Disorders, Specific Learning Disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorders, and Secondary Communicative Arts, as well as a decade of experience in specialized programming in Setting IV schools. Education-driven, she has previously completed a Master of Arts in Educational Leadership and is pursuing a doctoral degree in Social Psychology. With Spirit & Truth Publishing, Elaine is happily employed as a writer and editor.

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