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Tips for Working with Children and Youth with Disabilities

MARY ANNE PRATER

The following is adapted from a presentation at the 2006 BYU Women's Conference by Mary Anne Prater, PhD, chair of the Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education.

All children deserve to learn. Children with disabilities have needs as well as different learning styles that parents and teachers need to be aware of. When we understand what each student needs and how we can provide a positive learning environment, we can facilitate all children's learning and growth.



Though many people are hesitant, it's okay to do the following:

- Offer help, but ask first.
- Ask people about their disability—and it's okay for them not to talk about it.
- Use words like *see*, *hear*, and *walk* when talking to those with disabilities.
- Ask people who have speech problems to repeat what they said if you didn't understand.

When talking to a person with a disability, observe the following courtesies:

- Sit down when talking to a person in a wheelchair so their neck doesn't get sore.
- Talk to the person with the disability, not the interpreter or person accompanying him or her.
- Don't assume people with physical disabilities are sick or have mental disabilities.

Disabilities in the Classroom

Be sensitive to a student's limitations and strengths. Provide opportunities to participate.

Reading

- Don't spontaneously ask class members to read.
- Ask for volunteers.
- Make assignments in advance.
- Use pairs: one reads and the other follows along.

Classroom Participation

- Arrange in advance for contributions class members can make to the class or group. For example, those with a speech impairment may wish to prepare a presentation rather than join in a discussion.

Physical Classroom Arrangements

- Consider what would make class members more comfortable, able to learn, and able to participate:
 - Hearing impairment:* seat student where he or she can see the teacher speak.
 - Wheelchair:* remove chairs to make room.
 - Distractible child:* seat student next to the teacher.
 - Low vision:* allow student to sit close to the board.

Content

- Simplify or explain difficult vocabulary.
- Restate major concepts frequently.
- Use multisensory representations:
 - Show a picture.*
 - Give a verbal description.*
 - Play music.*
 - Provide a copy of the words.*

Class or Group Format

- Establish routines so class members know what to expect.
- Consider assigning another adult to the class.
- Recognize that when a major disruption occurs, learning stops.