

# **U.S. Hogs For Dogs, Inc.**

## **Sample Lesson Plans For Educators**

### **Lesson 2 -- Understanding Physical Disabilities**

#### **Introduction**

This lesson plan will help you introduce your students to the meaning of “physical disability” and help them gain a new understanding of what it might mean to be an individual with a physical disability.

#### **Discussion**

What does it mean to have a disability? Simply defined, a disability is something that prevents an individual from being able to do something that a majority of other individuals can do, like see, hear or be able to move about without restrictions on their movement. It does not mean that these individuals are unable to live fulfilling and active lives but that they may need extra help to accomplish certain tasks and may need adaptations in their environment in order to fully participate to the extent possible. Assistive devices such as wheelchairs, crutches, hearing aids, or Assistance Dogs may supply extra help.

#### **Types of Physical Disabilities**

There are many kinds of physical disabilities. Sometimes people are born with a disability. Some examples of this are:

- Spina Bifida: a condition occurring before birth when the spinal column doesn't close completely
- Blindness
- Deafness
- Cerebral Palsy: a disorder with impaired movement control due to brain damage
- Osteogenesis Imperfecta: a genetic disorder causing bones to break easily

Some disabilities appear later in life, such as:

- Multiple Sclerosis: an inflammatory disease of the central nervous system, resulting in a variety of symptoms including muscle and vision involvement
- Muscular Dystrophy: a group of diseases characterized by hereditary muscle degeneration where age of onset varies
- Epilepsy: a seizure disorder which may be something a child is born with or can be the result of a brain injury
- Illnesses with lasting effects such as polio.
- Other disabilities result from accidents, such as spinal cord injuries, occurring in car accidents, falls, or sports injuries.

Many disabilities occur from a variety of causes or events and can't be separated into neat categories.

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### **Disabilities are not selective**

Anyone can be born with or develop a disability as a result of an injury or illness. Disabilities do not “discriminate” based on age, gender, race or economic status. While children should not become concerned about developing a disability, it is helpful for them to understand that anyone, at some time in their life, could become disabled. The boy in the wheelchair in the next classroom or the young girl in their neighborhood who lost her vision in a car accident could be them.

### **Disabilities are not “catching”**

Children sometimes are afraid to make contact with or even be near someone with a disability because they are afraid that the disability may be “catching”. Their early experiences of illness are often with those that *are* contagious, such as a cold or influenza or pink eye. It is natural for them to be concerned. Sharing factual information about a disability with children can help them better understand that this condition is not something they can get by spending time with this person.

### **Helping children learn respect for differences**

Remember the old playground chant, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never harm me”? Well, even though literally true, people with disabilities CAN be harmed in other ways when language used to define their disability is, at best, inaccurate, and, at worst, insensitive or just plain cruel.

We have all worked to help children get past labels like “retard” for someone who may be developmentally delayed or have a learning disability, “gimp” for someone who has difficulty walking or “four-eyes” for someone wearing glasses. And, while it does sometimes seem difficult to keep up with changes in our common language used to describe or identify various disabilities, remembering to identify the person first and then the disability can simplify the entire issue.

This opens up a whole range of possibilities for discussion. For example, by referring to someone not as a “wheelchair bound person” but as an individual who uses a wheelchair, you have put the person before the disability. Talking with children about looking at the person first, getting to know them as a person, *then* seeing the disability, helps them get to know what they might have in common (like both liking dogs, enjoying camping, and not liking broccoli) rather than focusing on their differences resulting from one of them having a disability.

### **Activity 1**

Bring into the classroom photographs or drawings of people with a variety of disabilities. Discuss that another way of thinking about disability is the idea of “differently abled.” If a person cannot do some things because of his disability, he may be able to do other things even better. For example, a person who is not able to see may have learned to pay attention to his or her other senses more and may be better able to distinguish scents or hear sounds that you and I often miss.

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Next, have your class look at the pictures you brought in and think about what these people may be able to do better than someone else. Your students will have to use their imaginations here but it is a good exercise for thinking about how we are all different with different strengths and capabilities.

### Activity 2

While we cannot truly understand what it means to have a disability, we can help children gain some perspective on this issue by doing activities that simulate disabilities. Some possibilities are:

- Pair children up, having one child wear a blindfold to simulate loss of vision. The other child can help him or her safely negotiate the classroom.
- Children can be given old eyeglasses to wear that have had the lens smeared with vegetable oil or Vaseline. This gives them a chance to experience blurring vision.
- Obtain the use of a wheelchair from the school nurse and let children experience time in it.
- Obtain some disposable earplugs and have children experience the reduction of sound coming into their ears.
- Have children write some sentences while wearing a thick mitten on their writing hand to experience difficulty with fine motor control.

[Other ideas can be found in Getskow, Veronica & Konczal, Dee. 1996. *Kids with Special Needs: Information and Activities to Promote Awareness and Understanding*. ISBN: 0-88160-244-2.]

After these activities, discuss with your students their experiences with their temporary disability. What things could they do on their own? What activities did they need help with? How did they feel? How did someone else make it easier for them? What did someone do that made life more difficult for him or her? It is easy for children to think of these as “games” but help them understand that this is a way of life for a person with that disability.

**Note:** U.S. Hogs For Dogs, Inc. provides sample lesson plans as generic outlines for activities and topics of discussion within the classroom. Not all activities or topics may be suitable for all ages. The appropriateness and suitability of these lessons are left to the educator’s professional discretion.