

HOW TO START A SPECIAL NEEDS PROGRAM IN YOUR GYM



USA GYMNASTICS.



HOW TO START A SPECIAL NEEDS PROGRAM

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

- Gymnasts with physical and/or intellectual disabilities
- All ages — children through adults
- Family members
- Volunteers from the community or your gymnastics program

A program for gymnasts with special needs can include more than just the participants who have disabilities. It is beneficial to involve family members and volunteers in the classes, not just for the sake of having an extra set of eyes and hands available for support and class control, but also for the opportunity to integrate the gymnasts who have special needs into your gymnastics community. Sometimes it's hard to tell who benefits the most from this interaction. The gymnasts with special needs find acceptance, and the family members and volunteers not only learn compassion, but they find a way to relate to and have fun with the gymnasts with special needs. It's a win-win situation!

WHY SHOULD GYMNASTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS PARTICIPATE?

- FUN!
- Fitness
- Cognitive skill development
- Life skills development
- Social development
- Community involvement and acceptance
- Serve as examples of courage

The benefits of gymnastics for students with special needs are no different from other students, however they may be even more far reaching. Often, these students are turned away from programs, and the fact that they are accepted and cherished in your gym is in itself a huge benefit for the gymnast and family. Additionally, these students have probably received many types of therapy in clinical settings. Imagine being able to work on the same issues in the fun filled environment of a gym! Gymnasts with disabilities often have to work longer and harder to achieve even the most basic skills. In your gym, they can serve as examples of courage and perseverance, and be an inspiration to everyone whose lives they touch.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS FOR THE GYM?

- Generates additional income
- Facilitates use of the gym during off peak hours
- Gives opportunities for publicity and community outreach
- Aids in the development of better coaches through the use of precise skill progressions and creative coaching techniques
usagym.org/specialneedsvideos
- Creates a feeling of goodwill and acceptance in the gym

HOW DO I FIND SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS?

- Parent networking of children with special needs
- Special education teachers in local schools
- Church groups for special needs people
- Occupational and physical therapists in your area
- Encourage siblings of gymnasts who are already at your gym to participate.

WHAT PREREQUISITES SHOULD COACHES HAVE?

- Safety certification (U101)
- Knowledge of gymnastics skills and progressions
usagym.org/specialneedsvideos
- Experience teaching preschool
usagym.org/R101
and/or recreational classes
usagym.org/recreational
- Basic knowledge of the types of disabilities they may encounter

Coaches should keep in mind that they are teaching gymnastics, not provid-



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ing therapy (even though therapeutic effects are achieved). Most classes for students with special needs will closely resemble a preschool gymnastics class usagym.org/R101.

For additional guidance for coaches, look into contacting special education teachers, occupational and physical therapists and parent network of students with special needs.

WHAT EQUIPMENT IS REQUIRED?

- Regulation gymnastics equipment
- Preschool equipment
- Adaptive equipment

Typically, any gymnastics setting can be used for teaching students with disabilities. Coaches just need to choose appropriate activities on the equipment, taking into consideration the students' physical and intellectual abilities. Preschool props and equipment are ideal. As the program evolves, coaches will have creative ideas about how to use equipment and additional apparatus that will be helpful.

HOW SHOULD CLASSES BE STRUCTURED?

- One on one instruction
- Small group classes with an assistant for each student
- Small group classes with an assistant
- Group classes
- Mainstream with an assistant
- Mainstream

Depending on the abilities of the students, there are many types of class structures that will work. It is important to have an interview with prospective students to determine where they best fit into your program.

WHAT ABOUT SAFETY?

- Safety for the gymnasts with special needs — When setting up for and conducting classes, coaches need to be aware of physical and intellectual challenges of the gymnasts.
- Safety for the coaches — Taking into consideration the abilities of the students, coaches should only teach or spot skills that they are comfortable with.
- Safety for other people in the gym — Coaches should be aware of the tendency of some students to run unexpectedly, which can be a safety issue for other classes in the gym.

WHAT OTHER CONSIDERATIONS ARE THERE?

- Check with your insurance company to make sure they cover students with special needs.
- The registration forms currently used for all athletes in your gym are acceptable. Take into consideration including a section that features in depth information about the student's intellectual and/or physical disabilities if the parent indicates that athlete has that disability.
- Students who have Down Syndrome must have a neck x-ray before you allow them to participate in gymnastics. Anyone who has a condition called Atlanto-axial instability should not do artistic gymnastics. Rhythmic gymnastics is appropriate for these students.
- Prepare to embark on one of the most fulfilling experiences of your gymnastics career!

Imagine this: A gym where all students are welcome, no matter what their abilities are, where every effort is applauded, no matter how simple or complex the skill, where smiles and high fives are the norm, where able bodied gymnasts work alongside gymnasts with disabilities, learning from each other about courage and compassion. This has been my gym since we opened our doors to students with special needs thirty years ago. We began with four students and now our program has over seventy students, ages two to forty eight — and two of our original four are still actively involved! It's been an amazing journey and one that I recommend all gym owners and coaches take!

Cindy Bickman, Chattooga
Marietta, Georgia

WHAT OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERFORMANCE OR COMPETITION ARE AVAILABLE FOR GYMNASTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS?

- Gymnastics for All – Gymfest usagym.org/gfa101
- Festival Rhythmic usagym.org/festivalrhythmic
- TeamGym usagym.org/gfa101
- Special Olympics usagym.org/specialolympicsrhythmic

SPECIAL NEEDS RESOURCES

SPECIAL NEEDS WEB PAGE <https://usagym.org/pages/education/specialneeds/>

USA GYMNASTICS UNIVERSITY

- R301 Brain and Body usagym.org/pages/education/courses/R301/
- R101 Preschool Fundamentals Theory usagym.org/pages/education/courses/R101/
- R102 Preschool Fundamentals: Hands-On Training usagym.org/pages/education/courses/R102/
- USA Gymnastics University Library: Special Needs usagym.org/pages/education/pages/library

MATERIALS

- *Raising a Sensory Smart Child* by Lindsey Biel OTR/L and Nancy Peske—SensorySmarts.com



CLASS MANAGEMENT

BY BETH GARDNER, USA GYMNASTICS
NATIONAL INSTRUCTOR

- If you are new to coaching children with special needs, running a special needs class as a parent and tot class is often a successful strategy. Utilize a standard preschool curriculum as a basis for these lesson plans.

- When first meeting a child who has special needs, set up an appointment during the quiet time in the afternoon, prior to afternoon classes. This allows them to meet the coach, acclimate to the environment and it allows for the coach and the parent to discuss individual characteristics, set goals and share information specific to the child. This also

allows the coach to watch movement and assess needs prior to starting class.

- Grouping children with similar needs is another way to run successful classes. This allows the coach to become familiar with the movement needs of each disability. When utilizing this strategy, study the characteristics of the disability and place stations into the lesson plan that meet the movement needs and address the characteristics of the targeted disability.

- Mainstreaming should always be the goal for any child who has a special need. Sensory integration issues can pose difficulty in mainstreaming (joining classes with students without learning disabilities). If there is a child

with a sensory integration disability mainstreamed into class, utilize a standard lesson plan, include a linear, gross motor and rotary station (i.e. walk on a line, climb over a mat, spin on a rope) into the equipment set-up. All children will benefit from these movements, but children with sensory integration disabilities will respond well with these activities incorporated into the set-up.

The vestibular input provided by this sequence of movement helps them to calm and focus.

- When mainstreaming a child for the first time, provide for additional help in the class. Either allow the parent to join the class or place a “floater” coach with the class to help the child become familiar with class structure and remain on-task.

- Rules apply to ALL children. It is important that EVERY child follow the rules of the gym. One of the benefits of class participation is socialization. Children who have special needs MUST be treated like every other child, and must be required to follow the same rules as their peers.

- To avoid “meltdowns,” provide calming activities. These can either be incorporated into the class lesson plan, or kept in close proximity for rapid access in the event they are needed. Examples of calming activities include, glitter bottles, towels for wrapping, exercise balls for rocking, water play, beads to string, or a springboard for repetitive jumps.

- Allow for children with sensory integration disabilities to do an impact activity such as jumping on the trampoline before stretch. This allows them to calm and organize their bodies through proprioceptive activity prior to a focus activity.

- Incorporate bilateral work such as belly creeps, crawling and bear walks into the lesson plans. These help the corpus callosum to engage the two sides of the brain. Fundamental movements



TIPS

are important in creating the synapse development and they are often ignored.

- Like mainstreaming, acclimation to a normalized environment is important for children with special needs. Still, given the overly stimulating characteristics of the gym environment, it can be very difficult for a child with a sensory integration disability to immediately incorporate into a fully active gym. Allowing them to start during the quiet times prior to afternoon classes in one-on-one sessions can help them gradually acclimate to the environment. Decrease distractions in the first few classes such as dimming lights and turning music off. As they become accustomed to the gym, gradually introduce distracting environmental stimulants.

- Take a picture of yourself or the gym, and give it to the parent to show the child on the way to the gym each week. This allows the child to process the upcoming activity in advance.

- Give time warnings prior to changing activities. For example, "In 5 minutes we will be moving to bars. In 4 minutes we will be moving to bars. In 3 minutes we will be moving to bars..." This allows the child time to process the transition from one activity to another.

- When starting a new child who has processing difficulty, provide a visual activity board that shows the sequence of activities for the day. As each activity is completed, remove the picture indicating that activity so the child can track progress, and anticipate the upcoming activity. Once the child has been in the class for a period of time, slowly decrease the use of the visual board so they can acclimate to the gym activities without the visual warnings.

- When children have to wait for turns, place slightly deflated balls or half-donut mats in the waiting station. This allows the children to sit on rocking surfaces, and helps them to calm as they wait.

- Give children who over-stimulate easily a "safe zone" retreat to if they feel overwhelmed. This can be a place away from activity where they can calm before rejoining the class.

- Another good option for children who can tell when they are becoming over-stressed is to give them a signal they can use to let you know they need to remove themselves from the activity to calm down.

- Always be very careful with instructions. Children who have sensory integration disabilities are not only very visual, but they are also very literal. If you say something, they will take it at face value.

- Provide a variety of textures in the class for children to experience. This helps with tactile defensiveness and provides sensory input often sought by children with disabilities.

- Seizure-prone children must be closely monitored anytime there is height. High beams can be very dangerous for these children and should be avoided. Floor beams are better, but MUST be spot-



ted. Even the slightest height can be dangerous if a child experiences a seizure. Bars are also a safety hazard for these children and they must be closely monitored and spotted when doing bars activities.

- After getting permission from the parent to do so, try to talk to doctors, teachers, therapists and any other person who works closely with the child. This will

give insight on the things they need help with most, or the areas these specialists are trying to address. Augmenting their efforts is a great benefit to the child.

For more teaching tips on classroom management, visit our website at usagym.org/specialneeds



TESTIMONIALS

Special Needs is a wonderful benefit for our gym. Not only is gymnastics great for kids but when a child with special needs does gymnastics, you can multiply the benefits by 100! By using gymnastics to benefit children with special needs it helps in many areas besides what is common knowledge. Gymnastics also helps with their speech by working their core, their confidence, self-esteem, etc.

We have a student with Down Syndrome who was taking gymnastics classes at our gym. We started a Special Olympics program in our gym. After her first meet and winning gold all around, I asked her mother what daughter said about winning. Her mother said that her daughter didn't really say anything. It was foreign to her. She had never won anything. She was always the one trying to keep up. The subject of winning was never discussed. Today, she loves to talk about winning gold. She will decline to jump on the trampoline if it means more time to work on the bars.

We have had children come into our gym who can't run, jump, walk on a beam, hang on a bar, even after years of therapy. We start working on those things in the gym and they become a different child. Within a short time they are hanging and swinging on the bars, walking down the high beam and jumping down by themselves, running laps around the floor, talking more and clearer, dressing themselves and even initiate conversation!

Having people with special needs in our gym also benefits all those that are working with them. We have our team girls that volunteer and want to make sure that they are on the schedule to work with the classes for special needs. What type of people are those team

girls going to grow up to be? It is really a great benefit for those that want to work with special needs in the gymnastics community.

April Sawyer,
Showcase Gymnastics
Katy, Texas

The greatest joys in my coaching career have come from working with children with special needs. I have been blessed by all of the children with whom I work, but nothing can compare to witnessing the human spirit at work making miracles happen. There truly is reciprocal enrichment for the entire gym family as we share in each joyous moment and each milestone reached, big or small for every child in the program. One small step can sometimes be a monumental leap. Our gym cheers for them all.

Beth Gardner, Heart of Texas Gymnastics
Temple, Texas

Having a Special Needs Program at our gymnastics facility has helped raise awareness of the different disabilities that individuals live with every day. Not only has it opened the eyes of our gymnasts and staff that coach the athletes, but also to the people in the observation area that don't experience that sort of interaction. I have been coaching a Special Needs team for many years now, and the smiles on their faces never get old. We go to the Special Olympics in

Orlando every year and it is an experience like no other. It makes you appreciate what you have and that it could always be worse. I can honestly say that developing our Special Needs Program has been one of the most rewarding things I have ever done. Our athletes and their families are intrigued by our Special Needs Program and spread the word through-



out Pensacola. Every year our team grows in numbers and we couldn't be more pleased.

Jenny Wansley,
First City Gymnastics
Pensacola, Florida

We added a Special Needs Gymnastics program through Special Olympics over 15 years ago. It is an awesome program with some very enthusiastic, eager to learn athletes. It is a win-win situation. We are able to share our love of gymnastics and give back to our community. We incorporate our team kids, coaches and friends and I honestly am not sure who benefits more: the athletes or the volunteers?! Special needs athletes have the same aspirations as everyone else: the desire to be physically fit, improve coordination, learn new skills, etc. The sense of accomplishment/pride for both the athlete and the coach when they learn a new skill or perform their routine is priceless. These athletes are capable of so much and it just takes a little bit of our time to help them reach their potential. We look forward to our training time once a week. Those smiling faces remind us how fortunate we are to be able to share our knowledge of this great sport with them!

Lisa Arrowood,
Taylor Gymnastics
Perry, Florida

Special Olympics has been part of our gym for over 30 years. We have an awesome peer coach program. It's not what we teach these athletes, it's what they teach us. The amount of media that our gym has received is unreal. Many of our team gymnasts have received gymnastic related scholarships, based upon their work with special needs athletes.

Glen Marks, Elk Grove Gymnastics
Elk Grove Village, Illinois



MENTOR CLUBS

Mentor Clubs serve as advisors to clubs in the area regarding particular programs.

AIRBORNE GYMNASTICS AND DANCE

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BROADWAY GYMNASTICS

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