

THE PROBLEM

In the United States, 18.5% of children are obese.¹ According to Special Olympics Healthy Athletes data, for children with intellectual disabilities, the prevalence is almost double at 33%.² Regular physical activity is a key factor in preventing or decreasing obesity, a health issue that is costly to the health care system and can lead to a number of co-morbidities (e.g., type II diabetes). However, physical education curricula and equipment are often not accessible to children with intellectual disabilities, which prohibits participating in healthy lifestyle behaviors that can prevent obesity and other chronic conditions. In addition, many individuals with a profound intellectual disability use non-verbal forms of communication – facial expressions, vocal sounds, and gestures – to interact with their environment, which can cause communication barriers to participation in physical education.³

BACKGROUND

FlagHouse is a family-owned global provider of physical education equipment and programs. Launched in the 1950s, they originally sold flags, pennants, and banners for schools and summer camps. In the 1960s, leadership at FlagHouse realized an opportunity to create sporting equipment for physical education programs. After the passing of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the 1970s, FlagHouse analyzed their product offerings and realized they were excluding an entire population from their product line—children with disabilities.

Around the same time, two therapists in Europe created the first multi-sensory environment (MSE) space. MSE spaces provide stimulating visuals, sounds, smells, and textures that can aid in learning, development, and decreasing anxiety among people with intellectual disabilities. It was the belief and hope that improving communication and interaction would improve the quality of life of people with disabilities.

SOLUTION

After assessing their current products for accessibility for people with disabilities, FlagHouse developed a variety of solutions that were both profitable to the company and beneficial to people with intellectual disabilities, including:

- Creating an Adapted PE catalog dedicated to products for children with disabilities to use in physical education settings. It includes products that make traditional sports and PE

¹ Ogden, C.L., Carroll, M.D., Fryar, C.D., & Hales, C.M. (2017, October). Prevalence of obesity among adults and youth: United States 2015-2016. NCHS data brief no. 2.88 1-8. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.

² Special Olympics (2018). Healthy Athletes Software.

³ Black, E., Broxholme, S., William, L.R. Effects of four therapy procedures on communication in people with profound intellectual disabilities. *Journal for Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*. 2001; 14, 110-119.

equipment accessible to more children, such as: a multi-ring basketball stand; a bowling ramp that is more user-friendly for children who are in wheel chairs or have limited strength or mobility; and safe catch gloves and balls that make baseball safer for children with limited hand-eye coordination.

- Developing MSE spaces in a wide array of therapeutic and non-therapeutic facilities to help individuals with sensory processing disorder, cognitive and learning disabilities stimulate exploration, learning and development and process the world around them.
- Providing individual sensory products to various practitioners. Some examples include: sleepy time pillows, which are infused with a calming essential oil (such as lavender) and weighted vests, which provide a soothing sense of pressure and body stability.
- Partnering with a publishing company and a few universities to publish and disseminate CATCH (Coordinated Approach to Child Health), a curriculum designed to promote physical activity and healthy food choices for students in Pre K-Grade 8. FlagHouse provided funding to make the program inclusive and hired consultants to tailor the curriculum and its activities for children with intellectual disabilities.
- Adapting five of their guides to be more accessible and enable children of all ages and abilities to participate in group and individual challenges. For example, IT ROCKS!TM is a series of developmental lead-up activities designed to provide children with limited mobility the opportunity to participate in traditional traversing and climbing activities without the high cost, or required dedicated space, of a permanent climbing wall.

CHALLENGES

When FlagHouse began working toward inclusive health, they found that people did not yet understand the need for more inclusive products and services. Many of their new products, such as the MSE rooms, were unfamiliar to the market. Because of this, it was hard to get people to buy into the new offerings. In addition, once FlagHouse became invested in inclusive health, it became difficult to figure out where to start. There was so much that could be done in this space, and FlagHouse was only one company, with limited staff and funding.

BENEFITS

Once FlagHouse established the catalog for children with disabilities, they realized the high demand for the catalog and products. Some physical education providers and therapists remarked it was “exactly what they had been looking for” to impact their students or clients. FlagHouse’s MSE products had a large impact as well. In one instance, a nurse shared that when one of her patients with an intellectual disability became over stimulated, she would repeatedly knock her head against the wall or hit her head with her hand. When they brought her into an MSE room, she stopped this behavior inside the room, but also outside of it too. In another example, a dentist’s office started to use sensory equipment in their office and found it much easier to calm and focus children with intellectual disabilities during treatment.

LESSONS LEARNED

By creating products the market hadn't seen before, FlagHouse tapped into a portion of the population that was previously excluded, which increased their reach and earning potential. Additionally, FlagHouse learned the value of partnering with others to achieve inclusive health. For example, the CATCH curriculum already existed, but it was not being used. When FlagHouse learned about the program, they partnered with a publishing company and provided the funding needed to publish the program and implement it nationwide. In another example, the MSE rooms gained traction in Canada because the Ronald McDonald House Charities of Canada put approximately one million dollars to installing these rooms.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information on FlagHouse products, CATCH and MSE, visit:

- The FlagHouse disabilities catalog: <https://www.flaghouse.com/Special-Needs/>
- FlagHouse activity guides: <https://www.flaghouse.com/Pages/Activity-Guides/>
- Information on MSE: <https://www.flaghouse.com/Sensory-Solutions/Snoezelen-MSE/> or <https://www.snoezelen.info/>
- CATCH: <https://www.flaghouse.com/General-Education/CATCH/> or <https://catchinfo.org/>