



THE PROBLEM

People with intellectual disabilities have high rates of preventable health conditions, including hypertension, high cholesterol, obesity, and cardiovascular disease.ⁱ Increased participation in fitness and wellness activities can improve their overall health and well-being.^{i,ii} However, people with intellectual disabilities are less likely to engage in health promotion activities, and many fitness and wellness organizations do not know how to effectively serve this population and how to support the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in their programs.^{iii,iv}

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Improve health for all

Regular exercise and participation in health and wellness activities can improve overall health, fitness, mental health, self-confidence, and quality of life for people with intellectual disabilities.ⁱⁱ Currently, people with intellectual disabilities have very low rates of physical activity.^{iii,v} The majority of people with intellectual disabilities do not participate in any moderate physical activity, and only 10% meet the recommendations of the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans.^{vi} By supporting the inclusion and participation of people with intellectual disabilities in your organization's programs and activities, you can help reduce the high prevalence of obesity, cardiovascular disease, and physical inactivity among this population. Changes made to serve people with intellectual disabilities also will make your programs and activities more accessible for all people. For example, using concise easy to understand (non- technical) language in your communications will make your activities more accessible to people with intellectual disabilities but also to other participants.

Better serve your community

People with intellectual disabilities and their families are an untapped and underserved fitness and wellness market. Including people with intellectual disabilities in your fitness and wellness organizations will not only allow you to improve health outcomes for people with intellectual disabilities - it also will increase your memberships and lower societal health care expenditures. Ultimately, being more inclusive for people with intellectual disabilities will allow you to better serve your community and ALL who are a part of it.

WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

The following activities can help you get started in supporting the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in your organization:

Get to know people with intellectual disabilities

Understanding your community and intentionally reaching out to people with intellectual disabilities is key to creating an inclusive environment. Reach out to your local Special Olympics Program and other local community organizations to identify leaders that can connect you to people with intellectual disabilities. Ask the experts – ask people with intellectual disabilities to be a part of your team and to provide feedback and support on programmatic and organizational changes.

Train your staff

Integrate disability awareness and etiquette content into staff orientation and trainings. Identify staff that have experience working with people with intellectual disabilities and give them opportunities to educate their peers. Invite a guest speaker with intellectual disabilities to talk with your staff. Remind staff they already have the skills to make modifications so that people of all abilities may safely participate. Require staff to take continuing education courses.

Enhance your programs

Update your programs to be more user friendly for people with intellectual disabilities. For example, use multiple methods of communication. Typically, fitness and wellness programming centers around verbal instructions and modeling of actions. Consider adding visual/pictorial instructions, written instructions, and/or interactive activities and individualized support where appropriate. Also, use concise easy to understand (non-technical) language in all verbal and written communications. Allow participants to indicate what modifications or accommodations they may need when registering for your programs. When planning new programs, anticipate needs that may arise for people of different abilities.

Add financial assistance

Many adults with intellectual disabilities have low incomes. Consider adding financial assistance programs such as scholarships, sliding scale fees, or a “buddy discount” to allow people with intellectual disabilities to participate with paid support staff, family members, or friends.

Simplify paperwork

Ensure all registration/membership applications, health forms, and other paperwork use concise easy to understand language. Offer electronic, paper, and other formats, such as large print. Provide one on one assistance to people as needed.

Improve physical access

Minimize barriers in the physical environment that would hinder participation for people with mobility limitations. Do a walk-through of your gym floor or activity space with people with intellectual and mobility disabilities to get feedback on accessibility and layout.

Promote the new inclusive you

Ensure your marketing materials include pictures of diverse people, including people with disabilities, and contain language to reflect that ALL people of ALL abilities are welcome.

ⁱ Anderson, L. L., Humphries, K., McDermott, S., Marks, B., Sisirak, J., & Larson, S. (2013). The state of the science of health and wellness for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Intellectual and developmental disabilities, 51*(5), 385-398.

ⁱⁱ Blick, R. N., Saad, A. E., Goreczny, A. J., Roman, K., & Sorensen, C. H. (2015). Effects of declared levels of physical activity on quality of life of individuals with intellectual disabilities. *Research in developmental disabilities, 37*, 223-229.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bossink, L. W., Van Der Putten, A. A., & Vlaskamp, C. (2017). Understanding low levels of physical activity in people with intellectual disabilities: A systematic review to identify barriers and facilitators. *Research in Developmental Disabilities, 68*, 95-110.

^{iv} McGarty, A. M., & Melville, C. A. (2018). Parental perceptions of facilitators and barriers to physical activity for children with intellectual disabilities: A mixed methods systematic review. *Research in Developmental Disabilities, 73*, 40-57.

^v Dairo, Y. M., Collett, J., Dawes, H., & Oskrochi, G. R. (2016). Physical activity levels in adults with intellectual disabilities: A systematic review. *Preventive medicine reports, 4*, 209-219.

^{vi} National Core Indicators. Chart Generator 2014-15. National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services and Human Services Research Institute. Retrieved on 06/04/2018 from the National Core Indicators Website: <http://www.nationalcoreindicators.org/charts/>