



# Understanding Disabilities

## Mini-Lessons



Special Olympics  
**Unified Champion  
Schools**

**The mini-lessons on understanding disabilities that follow can be used as part of school-wide PBIS instructional lessons to assist with developing attitudes and behaviors that are respectful toward all students, regardless of ability.**

They can be used separately for individual lessons, or the set of three lessons can be used as a sequential set of activities, helping students reflect on their perceptions of disabilities and gain increased understanding. In the first lesson, students will be asked to complete a challenging task and relate the experience to the frustrations and feelings that those with disabilities often face daily. Student groups then will learn about disabilities and revisit their initial perceptions to see if and how they've changed. In the final lesson, students will gain an understanding of social inclusion and will look at the inclusiveness of formal and informal settings in their school. The mini-lessons also connect well with other instructional content that explores civic responsibility, inclusion or social justice.

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**Disabilities are yet another manifestation of global diversity. Let us always be committed to the fundamental principles of dignity and equality for all human beings. ”**

- Kofi A. Annan, Secretary-General, United Nations

# Understanding Disabilities

## Mini-lesson 1: Perceptions

### Time Required

20 minutes (Discussion time can be adjusted by reducing or adding to the questions posed in the activities at the discretion of the teacher)

### Materials Needed

Problems listed in Step 1 listed on board

### Steps

1. As students enter the room, challenge them to complete the problems listed on the board. Tell them that they will have two minutes to complete the assignment (you may want to establish a sense of urgency by offering a small prize or other incentive for the first one done with each problem).
  - a. Translate the following Latin phrase into English: *aut viam inveniam aut faciam*. [Answer: Either I shall find a way or I will make one.]
  - b. Solve the following physics problem: A pig is launched at a 43-degree angle at a velocity of 35 m/s. What is the pig's horizontal velocity? [Answer: 23.86]After a few minutes of trying, discreetly distribute answer sheets to some students but not others. Once someone has offered the correct answer for each problem, ask:
  - How did the exercise make you feel?
  - Did you sincerely try to complete the challenge?
  - For those that did not get the answer sheets, did it increase your frustration when other groups got the answer and you didn't?
  - Tell students that these feelings will serve as a springboard for the rest of the activity.
2. After completing the activity, ask students to get out a sheet of paper and write the first thing that comes to mind when you say the phrase, "disability." Record students' answers on the board and have students draw conclusions about class responses. Discuss students' responses, asking questions such as:
  - Would they characterize most responses as positive or negative?
  - Did responses emphasize weaknesses or strengths of people with a disability?
  - Did they focus on what those with disabilities "have" or what they "do not have"?
  - How would they describe their existing perceptions of people with disabilities?
  - What happens when we focus on what people are able to do rather than their struggles?
  - What can they do to shift their perspectives toward a strength-based view?

### DESIRED OUTCOMES:

Students will:

- Understand perceptions of disabilities and how they affect people's attitudes and beliefs.

# Understanding Disabilities

## Mini-lesson 2: Facts and Perceptions

### Time Required

30 minutes (Discussion time can be adjusted by reducing or adding to the questions posed in the activities at the discretion of the teacher)

### Materials Needed

Chart paper and markers

### Steps

1. Post chart paper around the room, with each paper having a different heading: intellectual disability, specific learning disability, autism, emotional disturbance (or emotional behavioral disability, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment and hearing impairment). Under each heading, write "Perceptions," then draw a horizontal line about halfway down the page. Label the bottom half of the page "Facts."
2. Ask students to define the term "disability." Record their responses on the board. Put the following definition on the board from the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which defines a person with a disability as "a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. The ADA also makes it unlawful to discriminate against a person based on that person's association with a person with a disability."
3. Discuss why it is significant that the ADA definition uses the phrase "a person with a disability" rather than "a disabled person."
4. Ask students to move around to the various charts posted in the room, jotting down their perceptions about each category of disability.
5. Divide the class into 7 small groups. The number of groups can be adjusted based on class size, with a goal of 3-4 students in each group. Assign each group one category of disability. Challenge each group to research that disability on the Internet and post facts they find to either confirm or deny the perceptions listed on the top half of their chart paper. Tell them to list each fact they find on the bottom half of the chart paper and post for the rest of the class to view.
6. Debrief by asking students to note where there are significant differences between students' perceptions and facts about the disabilities. Discuss the impact inaccurate perceptions have and ways students might work to overcome those perceptions in their school.

### DESIRED OUTCOMES:

Students will:

- Identify characteristics of various disabilities.
- Compare and contrast perspectives and facts on people with disabilities.

*"I've learned so much from Adam, and I'm sure he's learned some from me. If you take the time to make them your friend, they're the same as everyone else."*

# Understanding Disabilities

## Mini-lesson 3: Social Inclusion

### Time Required

20 minutes (Discussion time can be adjusted by reducing or adding to the questions posed in the activities at the discretion of the teacher)

### Materials Needed

Internet access  
Chart paper and markers (optional)

### Steps

1. Introduce students to the term, "social inclusion." Social inclusion in schools means all students are meaningfully engaged in formal and informal settings throughout the school including classrooms, hallways and playing fields; and they have meaningful opportunities to contribute to the school community.
2. Ask students to reflect on social inclusion in their school.
  - Are all students treated fairly and respectfully despite their race, religion, economic status, gender, sexual orientation or disability?
  - Do all students seem to have friends in the school?
  - Do students with and without disabilities share meaningful friendships?
  - What does the membership of school clubs look like? Are school clubs inclusive of students with and without disabilities?
  - Are there students with and without disabilities on the same sports teams? Does the school have opportunities for all students to have an opportunity to play sports, such as intramural teams?
3. Break the class into groups of 3-4 students. Ask each group to develop one brief activity that classes could use to increase opportunities for students with and without disabilities to interact in meaningful ways. The activity should be something that would take no more than 5 minutes, such as an icebreaker, opening exercise or discussion.
  - An example might be: Give each student 1 sticky note and ask them to write 3 strengths they possess on it. Ask them to hand the sticky notes back in to you. Mix up the sticky notes and post them on the board. Read the strengths listed on one note and read it out loud. Have students guess to whom the note belongs. Continue until all of the students have been identified.
4. School-wide Option: Collect all of the activities that were developed in each class, compile them and distribute to the entire staff. Ask teachers to use the activities periodically to continue helping students broaden their connections with each other. This should be done when all students are in class, including students with disabilities.
5. Reflection: Challenge students to complete this sentence, "People with disabilities...."

### DESIRED OUTCOMES:

Students will:

- Examine non-inclusive, intolerant behaviors toward people with disabilities in their school.
- Synthesize their understanding by defining one change they could make in their school to make it more welcoming and socially inclusive.

*"My ambition in life is to turn 'no' into 'yes.' If someone says I can't do something, I want to prove I can."*

- Suzanne O'Moore, Special Olympics Australia Athlete 5

## Extensions:

- Encourage students to look for opportunities to make their school more socially inclusive, such as taking steps to make school clubs more inclusive.
- Challenge students to make an intentional effort to interact with diverse students in their school, even if they haven't previously been friends.
- Invite local Special Olympics athletes, coaches or volunteers to speak with students about the organization and the training and experiences of those involved.
- Encourage students to follow local Special Olympics athletes as they prepare for their competition in regional and national Special Olympics competitions and hold countdown events to help build excitement and interest.
- Have students research Special Olympics Unified Sports® programs to see if there are ways to get involved ([http://www.specialolympics.org/unified\\_sports.aspx](http://www.specialolympics.org/unified_sports.aspx)).