



Helping Canadians with Disability/Chronic Disease Get Physically Active: Tip Sheets for Intermediaries

For Canadians with a disability, regular physical activity may be even more important than it is for the rest of the population. For a person with a disability, an active lifestyle can open doors to increased health, social inclusion and self-empowerment - doors which might otherwise remain closed. Access to physical activity can eliminate the likelihood of acquiring secondary health conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure or heart disease. Being active builds resiliency and can provide an all-important outlet for a person with a disability.

These tip sheets are designed to provide general information in support of Canada's Physical Activity Guidelines, developed by the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology.

Developmental Disabilities

General Information

This tip sheet is designed to provide some general information about Developmental Disabilities. Concepts outlined in this paper should not be used as strict definitions or rules applicable to all those affected, but merely as guidelines. Every person is different. Remember, participants themselves are your number one resource when trying to ensure the inclusiveness of your physical activity programs.

Many individuals with developmental disabilities have little obvious physical difference from those without developmental disabilities but they may actually have some unique physical challenges. Often their movements may be affected, particularly their gait. This difference in kinesiology may make their needs very specific. In some cases, they may struggle with balance issues and like those with mental health issues, they may have metabolic challenges as a result of the long-term effects and side effects of their medications.

Facts and Figures

Developmental disabilities are most often congenital and can have a broad range of effects on the individual. Some have exaggerated emotions and can be boisterous and happy most of the time. They can also have emotions that are easily triggered and they may be easily upset. Each individual is unique.

What are Developmental Disabilities?

Developmental disabilities usually result when something goes amiss during pregnancy and delivery. It can be the result of something amiss with the genetic components or of oxygen deprivation at any time during pregnancy or during delivery. These challenges can affect the individual's mood and temperament, gait and movement, and metabolism. They may also have other disabilities which compound their intellectual or physical challenges.

Consequences of Developmental Disabilities

A person with a developmental disability may not meet the developmental milestones that are considered “normal”. Their intellectual abilities may be reduced and they may have difficulty understanding complex instructions. They may also have challenges with movement and struggle with weight issues.

People's abilities may be greatly affected by Developmental Disabilities. Symptoms can be severe or mild and may vary greatly from one day to the next. Common issues faced may include:

- hypervigilance, being easily startled and finding noisy rooms uncomfortable;
- cognitive (problems with memory, initiation, concentration, organization, and comprehension);
- behavioural (depression, irritability, inability to sit still);
- some individuals may appear to have little control over their emotions.

Working with a person who has a Developmental Disability

A person with a Developmental Disability may present with a combination of the above issues and that combination may change from one day to the next. They may exhibit compulsive behaviors as coping mechanisms to deal with their anxiety. They may also have reduced self-esteem or motivation. It is quite common for people to experience depression as a result of their Developmental Disability.

Understanding a Person with a Developmental Disability

People with a Developmental Disability may seem fearful or over-reactive. Clients may appear to be resistant to your suggestions. It is important to understand that often this behaviour is not intentional. They may also have poor short-term memory. People with a Developmental Disability may have limited ability to understand or remember complex routines. You need to be patient and encouraging. Use simple language and limit the number of steps in the process. People may exhibit repetitive behaviors used to calm themselves. Patience and understanding are your best tools for working with these individuals. Good communications is key to developing a successful working partnership.

Tips for Getting Active - Overcoming Barriers

- Involve the person in physical activity goal setting - make sure goals are realistic. It may be helpful to provide some options for goals that they can choose from.
- Educate the individual and their family about the importance of physical activity.
- Know the individual's strengths and limitations - remember that everyone will have different limitations. Provide positive encouragement and support at all times.
- Be patient. Listen to the person and encourage them to communicate their needs to you - they are the experts at what they need, not you!

Teaching and Communication Technique

The following are ideas for ensuring maximum participation for people with Developmental Disabilities, depending on their unique abilities. You can use these strategies in combination:

- Memory - write instructions down.
- Literacy – individuals may have difficulty reading so you may need to develop other memory tools.
- Inattention - minimize distractions during the activity, and try to keep things consistent.
- Limited concentration - provide frequent breaks and opportunity for rest.
- Physical limitations and fatigue - modify aspects of the activity to match with the person's physical abilities to promote success (i.e. lighter equipment, change size of activity area).
- Emotional - encourage success and mastery during physical activity in order to boost self-esteem, no matter what level (low or high) they may reach. It is important that they do not feel they have failed in any way.
- Social behaviour - use smaller groups, modeling a supportive approach and patience. Provide a structured environment, with frequent milestones as determined by the individual.

Physical Activity Tips and Modifications

Developmental Disabilities can cause unpredictable behaviors and change frequently, so make sure you are always aware of the person's strengths and weaknesses on that particular day. Patience and understanding can help you to meet the person's needs on their own terms.

Resources:

National Network for Mental Health - www.nnmh.ca

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Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability

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