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# Afterschool Alert

## ISSUE BRIEF

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### Afterschool and Students with Special Needs

*The Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking and Technology Program (DO-IT) helped me become a better advocate for myself. I'm not afraid to ask for help so that I can get certain accommodations that allow me to live as normal a life as possible with my disability and accomplish what I need to, whether it be for school or work.*

**-- Marissa Griffin, former DO-IT participant**

Children with activity limitations are often referred to as having special needs, or being disabled or differently-abled. This simply means that they are unable to participate fully in age-appropriate activities because of chronic physical, mental, emotional or behavioral conditions.<sup>1</sup> The Maternal and Child Health definition of children with special health care needs are those children who have or are at risk for a chronic physical, developmental, behavioral or emotional condition and who also require health and related services of a type or amount beyond that required by children generally.<sup>2</sup>

According to the latest numbers from the U.S. Department of Education, 14 percent of students ages 3 to 21 were served in programs for the disabled in 2003-2004. This is a steady increase from 12 percent of students served in 1993-1994. Some of this increase may be attributed to improved diagnostics—identifying more children who have special needs, especially speech or language impairments or learning disabilities. Today, more than 2.8 million families are raising at least one child with a disability between the ages of 5 and 17, representing 1 out of every 10 American families raising children. Due to advancements in medical technology, individuals with disabilities are living longer and forming a larger portion of the population.<sup>3</sup> Youth with disabilities face significant challenges both in the school environment and in their transition to adult lives. Compared to their non-disabled peers, students with disabilities are less likely to receive a regular high school diploma. Sixty five percent of individuals with disabilities are unemployed or underemployed and 26 percent live in poverty.<sup>4</sup>

Historically, children with special needs were educated separately from their non-disabled peers, or institutionalized and not educated at all. However, following the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's, parents of children with disabilities began demanding that their children have access to free and appropriate public education. In 1975, legislation was passed ensuring that students with disabilities are allowed to participate and are accommodated in public educational programs. Today, most students with disabilities (96 percent) are educated in regular school buildings, and almost half are in regular classrooms for most of the day.<sup>5</sup> Yet, despite advances in incorporating

inclusive programming, children who qualify for special education, particularly children with significant disabilities are grossly under-represented in afterschool programs.<sup>6</sup>

**Inclusion of students with special needs in the classroom is beneficial to all students.**

There is a strong research base to support educating children with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers.<sup>7</sup> Students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms show academic gains in a number of areas, including:<sup>8</sup>

- Improved performance on standardized tests
- Mastery of individualized education goals
- Higher grades
- Improved behavior
- Increased motivation to learn

Including students with disabilities in a classroom does not interfere with the academic performance of students without disabilities. In fact, many of the strategies employed in inclusive classrooms also benefit students without disabilities—such as working in cooperative learning groups and peer tutoring.<sup>9</sup>

**Afterschool programs use a range of ways to include students with special needs.**

As in the regular classroom, afterschool programs were historically ill-equipped or unwilling to include children with special needs in their programs. There were concerns that meeting the needs of students with disabilities would require exhaustive attention and resources. While federal legislation mandates that students with special needs have access to afterschool programs that take place on school grounds, the goal is not to put a strain on afterschool programs, but rather to encourage programs to “make reasonable accommodations” for individuals with disabilities in order to integrate them into the program to the highest degree possible.<sup>10</sup> As afterschool programs shift away from a medical or therapeutic model towards inclusion programming, programs can use the supplemental services and assistive technology available to students receiving special education services during the regular school day to accommodate these children.

- Kids Included Together (KIT) is a non-profit organization that supports recreational, child development and youth development programs that include children with and without disabilities. KIT provides training and support on best practices for the out-of-school time field so that they may include children with special needs in their programs. KIT also partners with programs and focuses on sustainability so organizations will continue to provide inclusive environments after KIT’s involvement has ceased.<sup>11</sup>
- Public schools in Orange County, Florida offer afterschool programs to all children, including children with disabilities. The county has set up a fund to ensure that the programs are adequately funded. The staff is encouraged to attend training programs, provided by the county and the school system, to best meet the

*All children have the right to play. Afterschool programs that include children with special needs allow all children to develop social skills as well as participate in enrichment activities. These programs bring out the best in all the children.*

**-- Elizabeth Fulmer  
School Age Child Care  
Services, Orange County  
Public Schools  
Orange County, Florida**

needs of all students. Dovetailing this accessibility is the philosophy that “labels don’t follow the kids” from the school day to afterschool. All children have the opportunity to participate in each program’s activities, with modifications made as needed.<sup>12</sup>

Afterschool staff working with students with special needs must consider students’ interests, rather than their needs, when selecting extracurricular activities. Many popular activities can use technology and supplemental services as well as using creative and collaborative planning to foster participation in activities. Some examples of activities that can be adapted so that students with special needs can participate include theater and the arts, athletics, cooking and academic clubs.

**Afterschool programs positively impact students with special needs in key areas.**

Afterschool programs provide students with special needs opportunities to increase their skills while building on their potential. Studies show that students with special needs who participate in afterschool have:<sup>13</sup>

- Higher academic achievement
- Improved school attendance
- Higher aspirations
- Improved social competence
- Improved behavior

Sadly, students with special needs, especially learning disabilities, typically hold positions of lower social status than their non-disabled peers. However, when these students participate in afterschool programs, they gain many social benefits that can’t be achieved anywhere else.<sup>14</sup>

- The opportunity to assume leadership responsibilities and demonstrate talents that are not always apparent during the regular day.
- A place to truly integrate with peers and friends, even after they have been mainstreamed in educational classrooms.
- Improved relationships with children of all abilities.
- The chance to be included in a wide variety of activities with their non-disabled peers.

*The youth aren’t stigmatized from the jump, as they sometimes are in the regular school day. We work to give them a sense of belonging, and help them explore their talents. We do that for all our youth, but for special needs youth, it’s a real opportunity to be successful.*

**--Megan Demarkis  
Harlem RBI Program Director**

**Afterschool improves academic, cognitive and social skills.**

- Harlem RBI’s REAL Kids Program has designed its program to meet the needs of diverse students. They provide a small youth to adult ratio (5:1) that allows for authentic relationship building and consistent case management. They offer intensive staff training and

ongoing professional development to support and encourage staff. The learning environment addresses and strengthens social/emotional skills as well as academic/cognitive skills. And they offer youth the opportunity to stay with the program through high school. As a result, youth in the program, no matter what

- level of ability, have the opportunity to be physically healthy, matriculate to college, make friends and be confident, competent and caring individuals.<sup>15, 16</sup>
- The Jack Nadel Social Services Center in New York runs an afterschool social skills program that incorporates inclusion programming for elementary students with special needs. Students participate in a social skills class, and also get help with homework, do arts and crafts, music and science activities. The inclusive, nurturing environment fosters a sense of competency and belonging.<sup>17</sup>

### **Afterschool provides access to physical activity and play.**

Ten percent of children have a disability that prevents them from using most public playgrounds. It is vitally important that these children remain engaged and active and afterschool provides a safe environment for children with special needs to physically explore their world, learn and play. Play is vital for normal growth, development and health for children of all abilities. Further, deprivation of sufficient activity and recreation often leads to the development of secondary disabilities and conditions.<sup>18, 19</sup>

- Natalie has a disability that makes it difficult for her to interact appropriately with other children. She now attends the YMCA childcare and afterschool program in San Jose, California. The program gives her the opportunity to play alongside other children in a safe and supportive environment. Her teachers take time to facilitate the children's play and improve the social skills of all the children. The inclusive programming of the center allows Natalie to play and grow with her new friends while giving her the support she needs.<sup>20</sup>

### **Afterschool supports families.**

Beyond the many benefits the programs provide the children and their families, many children with special needs cannot be left unattended, so being home alone is not an option. Afterschool also provides a comfortable setting for family involvement, critical to the success of all students, and especially beneficial to students with special needs

- The Southwest YMCA at Fammatre in San Jose, California provides year round programs for children in Kindergarten- 8th grade including afterschool and summer childcare. In keeping with the YMCA's mission to support families and communities, children with special needs are gladly welcomed, including those who may need additional adult support. Included in the curriculum are service learning projects, LIT program (Leaders in Training) and Wednesday Clubs. The YMCA also offers parent and child programs, and programs for parents only such as a parent's night out. The YMCA's core values of honesty, respect, responsibility and caring are incorporated into daily decision-making and speech with the children of all abilities, while also encouraging the children to do the same.<sup>21</sup>

### **Conclusion**

While all children benefit from high quality afterschool programs, afterschool gives children with special needs the chance to experience meaningful and authentic belonging. Beyond the benefits of providing learning and enrichment activities, afterschool offers children with special needs the chance to engage with their non-disabled peers in a way often not possible during the regular school day. Afterschool provides a safe haven

where children with special needs can learn, play and succeed side-by-side with children of all abilities.

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<sup>1</sup> National Center for Health Statistics. (2006) *Chartbook on Trends in the Health of Americans. Limitation of Activity: Children* (pp. 44-45). Hyattsville, MD. Retrieved from <http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/health4.asp>. June 23, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Comments and Legislative Recommendations *No Child Left Behind*. KIT Kids Included Together. San Diego, CA. [www.kitonline.org](http://www.kitonline.org). October 9, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> National Center for Health Statistics. (2006) *Chartbook on Trends in the Health of Americans. Limitation of Activity: Children* (pp. 44-45). Hyattsville, MD. Retrieved from <http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/health4.asp>. June 23, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Education. (2003) *Twenty-Fifth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/about/reports/annual/osep/2003/execsumm.html>. May 19, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Comments and Legislative Recommendations *No Child Left Behind*. KIT Kids Included Together. San Diego, CA. [www.kitonline.org](http://www.kitonline.org). October 9, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Gartner, A., Lipsky D. (1997) *Inclusion and school reform: Transforming America's Classrooms*. Baltimore, MD: PH Brookes Publishing.

<sup>8</sup> National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY). (1995). The national study of inclusive education. New York: National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion, Graduate School and University Center, City University of New York.

<sup>9</sup> York, J., Vandercook, T., Macdonald, C., Heise-Neff, C., & Caughey, E. (1992). Feedback about integrating middle-school students with severe disabilities in general education classes. *Exceptional Children*, 58(3), 260-269.

<sup>10</sup> National Institute on Out-of-School Time. (2007) *Afterschool programs and students with special needs*. Research Brief. Retrieved from <http://www.niost.org>. June 23, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.kitonline.org/aboutkit/aboutkit.html>. Retrieved May 19, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> From email and telephone correspondence with Elizabeth Fulmer, Ed.D., School Age Child Care Services, Orange County Public Schools. July 7, 2008 and September 22, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> National Center for Technology Innovation and Center for Implementing Technology in Education. (2006) Boosting Inclusion in After School Activities with AT and Supplemental Services. Retrieved from <http://www.ldonline.org/article/9924>. June 23, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.harlemrbi.org/mission.html>. Retrieved on July 28, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Email communication with Megan Demarkis on July 15, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> The Jack Nadel Social Services Center. [www.sjjcc.org](http://www.sjjcc.org). Retrieved September 15, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> The National Center on Physical Activity and Disability. [http://www.ncpad.org/yourwrites/fact\\_sheet.php?sheet=492&view=all&print=yes](http://www.ncpad.org/yourwrites/fact_sheet.php?sheet=492&view=all&print=yes). Retrieved on July 28, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/factsheets/DH\\_sec\\_cond.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/factsheets/DH_sec_cond.pdf). Retrieved on July 28, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Email communication with Kathleen O'Hara, Center Director YMCA at Fammatre at Southwest Branch, San Jose, California. September 22, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.