



INCLUDING SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS IN EARTH FORCE FIELD WORK

Earth Force and Special Education Students

Earth Force experiences inherently involve taking students outdoors, into their neighborhoods, beyond the classroom. When your group includes students with identified special education needs, you will likely want to take extra care in preparation and facilitation of field work.

Students with special needs can be identified within schools and provided special education services. Special needs include learning disabilities, communication disorders, emotional and behavioral disorders, physical disabilities, and developmental disabilities. Special needs are addressed with services ranging from dedicated teacher aides, on-going differentiation in instruction, concentrated resource rooms and centers, to adaptive technology and tools.

Common special education terms:

IEP (Individualized Education Plan) – a confidential document within a public school system, to detail delivery of services for a student identified as special needs. IEPs result from application of IDEA.

ILP (Individualized Learning Plan) – a document created for each student within a public school system, to identify learning strengths and potential educational issues. Most states either mandate or strongly encourage ILPs for all middle and high school students.

504 Plan – guidance (not necessarily written) to provide services and/or modify a disabled student's learning environment to provide equitable access. 504s result from application of a federal civil rights law, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, specifically its Section 504 which contains a broader definition of disability than IDEA does.

Rtl (Response to Intervention) – Rtl is 21st Century approach to special education built on the premise that all students need special attention from time to time. Rtl intervenes with individual students when assessments and situations indicate a need for extra support. To be effective, Rtl requires continual progress monitoring and frequent screening. But, it can move away from permanently labeling students as “special needs.”

Accommodations – modified tools and/or procedures meant to provide equitable access to teaching and learning for students with disabilities.

IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) – the federal law governing educational services to children with disabilities. Enacted in 1975, IDEA ensures states and public agencies are providing adequate services to more than 6.5 million eligible youth.

ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) – the federal law governing protection of the civil rights of people with disabilities. It covers broader areas than IDEA, including employment, state and local government services, public spaces, commercial facilities, and transportation. Enacted in 1990, ADA was modeled on Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

ELL (English Language Learner) – A student in English-based schools whose native language is not English. Being an ELL is not a learning disability, though there are many special services used to support English language acquisition.

When you are a community partner, guest facilitator, or expert volunteer serving as a guest instructor, the group's teachers and administrators may inform you of the presence of young person(s) with special needs. Because of privacy, they are not required to share this information and will likely be limited in what details they can share. Still, you can incorporate a few subtle shifts in facilitation to better serve the whole group.

Here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Consult with adults who know the specific special needs you are adapting to, in the teaching situation at hand. Each school has at least one educator with direct responsibility for special education. By doing so, you can **focus on the immediate actions you need to take to adapt the experience** you are providing. Don't be afraid to ask for assistance from adult chaperones, especially if they know the students better than you do.
- **Know ahead of time what components of the outdoor setting and situation you can control. For elements beyond your control**, know what changes in conditions call for modification, a timeout or, perhaps, even a full work stoppage and exit of the group from the field work.
- If feasible, conduct a short briefing with only their teachers and other accompanying adults. Provide clear expectations to the student group upfront. Within the expectations **include consideration of the special needs present without calling undue attention** to either individual students or the accommodations you have built into the field work.
- **Always model appropriate, inclusive behavior.** Reward positive behavior and defuse negative behavior. Emphasize interpersonal kindness and environmentally responsible behavior.
- **Emphasize procedures** to be followed, call out learning targets for the field work, and cue transitions. Then, be sure to repeat these individually if indicated by any communication disabilities. Many outdoor educators have a nature-inspired attention-getter (such as a bird call imitation) to signal quiet and “eyes on me.”
- **Ask a student before providing assistance**, even if that student is nonverbal. Give explanations of what you are about to do, what you are doing, what you did, and why – both in terms of accommodating and collecting field data.
- For young people with physical disabilities, such as using a wheelchair:
 - **Mobility equipment enables a student**, giving them freedom they do not have otherwise. Wheelchairs and other devices such as walkers and crutches are personal items much like clothing. Consider them part of the student, not an object to touch or manipulate without permission.
 - Converse face-to-face, kneeling if appropriate. Present items for observation at eye-level. Set-up anything to be manipulated at suitable height and on a suitable surface.
 - Students in wheelchairs often change positions, sometimes moving out of their chairs. Position changes are healthy. A student may need be able to transfer him- or herself, or need a little or a lot of help in transferring. Make sure you contribute in the desired way, and using proper techniques.
- **Nature play and learning in natural settings benefit all.** When selecting, preparing, and guiding a group in the field, be watchful for qualities of an outdoor learning space known to be particularly beneficial for certain special needs students, as well as useful to others:
 - Tranquil and quiet space is soothing, especially for young people with hyper-sensitivity and difficulty filtering sensory inputs.



More tips to keep in mind:

- Clear boundaries such as fences help if there are control of mobility issues.
- Pathways meeting ADA design standards have smooth, firm surfaces; are wide enough for two people to pass each other or walk side-by-side; and have clear edges.
- Plenty of shade is a preferred quality. Trees are nature's prime source of this. If a site lacks shade, consider bringing some along – portable canopies and umbrellas do the trick.
- Memorable field work involves all senses, takes place at locations with both fixed and manipulable components (such as cobble in a stream), includes small comfortable spaces for reflection (often called “caves and cubbies”), and has elements that provide some physical challenges to all (such as a stream bank descent into a stream).
- Be self-reflective, as some “barriers” are attitudinal, not physical.

In selecting accommodations, try to allow each and every student meaningful involvement across the entire experience. As an example, consider a stream monitoring event. Even if a student cannot be in the stream next to classmates, work to get them as *near* the stream as feasible, and to have all individuals get up close for multi-sensory interaction with the water quality monitoring equipment and any organisms collected.

Safety and acceptance are the dual objectives of special needs accommodations. A guiding principle should be to not over-adapt an experience. A term, taken from IDEA, which tries to capture this sentiment is “least-restrictive environment” – meaning to focus on inclusion whenever possible. Reducing restrictions and removing barriers for participation demonstrates within your group the very kind of civic relational dynamics that clear the way toward Earth Force's ultimate goal of developing environmental citizens.

Sources

Giangreco, M.F., McEwen, I., Fox, T., & Lisi-Baker, D. (2002). *Assisting Students Who Use Wheelchairs: Guidelines for School Personnel*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooks Publishing Co.

Kwan, T., & Texley, J. (2002). *Exploring Safely: A Guide for Elementary Teachers*. Arlington, VA: National Science Teachers Association.

Outdoor Education for the Handicapped Project. (1983). *A Facilitator Guide: Outdoor Education for the Handicapped*. Lexington, KY: Kentucky University. Retrieved from ERIC Database. (ED 273 403)

Sachs, N., & Vincenta, T. (2011, April). Outdoor environments for children with autism and special needs. *Implications*, 9(1), 1-8.

Watson, A., & McCathren, R. (2009, March). Including children with special needs: Are you and your early childhood program ready? *Beyond the Journal - Young Children*, 1-8.