

Guidelines for Working With Students Who Have Developmental Disabilities

1. Each classroom of students with developmental disabilities is different.

Some students who have developmentally disabilities have Down's syndrome. Other students are autistic. Some students have a low IQ because they experienced a serious head injury or have suffered a stroke.

When you enter a classroom of students who have developmental disabilities, it is unlikely that the teacher will tell you why each student has a developmental disability. You will go in to a class without knowing the students' specific strengths and weaknesses.

Do the best with this situation that you can. Realize that being patient and kind goes a long way and is extremely important when you do not know people well. If one student is deliberately or unconsciously being uncommunicative, speak to the class.

2. Do not be negative by the way some students who have developmental disabilities may look or act.

Some students who have developmental disabilities do not look or act like other people in their age group. You may encounter students who have dark circles under their eyes. Some students who have developmental disabilities are extremely overweight. The medications that they take to be calm or focus better cause them to gain weight. You may work with students who use a voice box to communicate, have faces that look different because they have undergone strokes or birth defects, move their arms and legs around constantly, wave pieces of paper as they work, or drool.

For a person who has not been trained as a teacher for students who have developmental disabilities, these situations can be of concern to you. You may be confused or frightened. Recognize this when you go into the situation. Do not expect yourself to be perfect. As you gain more experience



in teaching students who have developmental disabilities, you will improve your skills at communicating with students who you do not know how to reach now.

The one thing you should always bring to each classroom is your love and respect for each student as a person. Be direct, helpful, and positive.

3. Students will not always like you.

Just because you are there to teach and you are volunteering your time does not mean students will be nice to you.

Often, in an upper-level elementary school, middle or high school classroom, students may be rude to you or give provocative answers. This behavior may not be related to their developmental disabilities. It may be their personalities or a typical preteen or teen response.

Sometimes students who have developmental disabilities will not like what you are wearing. For some students, a certain color, or a shirt or tie with a particular theme, such as a tiger, may cause them to feel anxiety or fear. You might want to ask the teacher of the class if there are any things you should not wear.

Some students who have developmental disabilities are nervous with new people. They may not communicate with you at first. Be prepared for this by bringing an icebreaker activity that does not have to be interactive.

4. Simplify difficult materials.

Law is full of complicated texts: the Constitution of the United States, state constitutions, state criminal and civil codes, and municipal ordinances. You may want to use these texts when you teach. Be prepared to explain complicated texts or use simplified versions of them.

5. Do not allow students to ask inappropriate questions or display inappropriate behaviors.

Sometimes students who have developmental disabilities will ask you inappropriate questions. For example, when I told some students I was a



criminal defense attorney, they asked me if I killed people. Even when I told them no, they asked me what types of instruments I used to kill people. I had to tell them that I was going to move on and discuss other things to get their minds off the different methods of capital punishment. The classroom teacher should help if this occurs.

Some students who have developmental disabilities have issues with control and touching. When they are excited, they may hit themselves, each other, teachers, and objects in the room. When you see students become physical, i.e. touch each other, adults, or objects, stop them by setting rules. The classroom teacher is there to maintain control.

6. Recognize the strengths and weaknesses of students who have developmental disabilities.

Students who have developmental disabilities usually work more slowly and understand difficult topics to a lesser degree than other students in their age group. The students are aware of their obstacles. They often compensate by being very creative and determined.

For example, I once taught a student who was told to write two sentences about an animal she wanted as a pet. She wrote a whole page full of 2-sentence paragraphs about different animals that she wanted.

Students who have developmental disabilities may have speech impediments. Work with them by speaking to them and trying to understand what they are saying. You can also request a classroom aide or the regular teacher to help you. If a student has trouble getting out their words, and takes a while getting their answer to you out, announce their answer to the class. It is a big deal that the student made the effort to tell you, a guest teacher, what they thought, even if they had to take a lot of time to do so.

Some students who have developmental disabilities cannot write the words to form their answers. When they attempt to place a pencil to paper, all that comes out is circles or scribbles. They may need to talk to you or an aide, and then you can write down an answer for them.



Students who have developmental disabilities cannot always type their answers either. They may type out a string of words that make no sense to you when you read it. If you go over the words with them, however, they may fill in the blanks with other words and form a better answer. Students who are typing should always use spell-check.

Often students who have developmental disabilities can lose sight of the final goal of your lesson as you teach. They may not remember details from minute to minute. They can get easily confused if you talk about something else. Sometimes students who have developmental disabilities will ask you the same questions over and over. Repeat the correct answers and help them move on to the next step.

Students who have developmental disabilities sometimes feel left out of a lesson because they feel it does not relate to them. They may interject randomly in your presentation on assault and battery, “My little brother hit me once!” Accommodate their responses and keep moving toward your conclusion.

These tips should show you that you will usually need a lot of time to interact with the students. Prepare to take extra time to finish your lecture, conduct your activity, review your answers, and have the students write legible, correct answers to activity questions.

7. Realize that you are usually already working with a cooperative small group.

Students who have developmental disabilities are usually placed into classes with 10 or fewer students. This is good because you are already in a small group. It may be hard because you cannot do large-group activities.

A class of students who have developmental disabilities is experienced with working cooperatively and including all the members. Try not to leave anyone out.

8. Do not expect that you will have a lot of outside help.



Some classes have one aide and a regular teacher. Other classes have two or three aides and a regular teacher. Teachers and aides should not use your guest teaching time as a personal break. You may have to teach by yourself or with the help of a few people, all of who are unfamiliar with your subject matter. Be prepared for this and do not design a lesson that requires the participation of many supervising adults.

9. Realize the limits of students' patience.

Teachers often follow a routine in class. Your presentation is a disruption to the norm.

A teacher may stop students from doing something “extra” that they enjoy, such as a game or a computer activity, to accommodate your presentation. Recognize this and understand it. Games and computer activities are “downtime” that allow students to escape frustration and boredom. Make your activity interesting and memorable as a response.

10. Reward yourself.

Teaching students who have developmental disabilities requires patience and understanding. You will have contributed a great deal and have learned a lot from the experience.

Other Tips

- a. Be willing to come in on a day when you are not engaged in Justice Teaching to see how students normally interact and how you would fit into their routine.
- b. Do not use food as a reward. In particular, do not bring or throw out candies that students who have diabetes or are on medications may not be able to eat.
- c. Do not frighten students with grotesque images or crimes. Do not bring up extremely controversial topics in class.



d. Clarify what type of attorney you are and what type of work you do every day for students.

e. Create a journal in which you write down three things that you learned from working with this group of students. Note their grade level/s, date, time, teacher, and school. Share this journal with other Justice Teaching attorneys who work with students who have developmental disabilities.

