

# Group Activities: One Child at A Time



While planning group activities that meet the needs and interests of individual children is obviously important, it can seem almost unachievable for a diverse group of young children. Truly individualizing is more than viewing each child as a unique person. It means planning and conducting activities which offer opportunities for each child to learn. An individualized group activity provides learning opportunities at various developmental levels and addresses each child's interests. Individualizing is a key aspect of inclusion because it allows young children with disabilities and/or developmental delays opportunities to participate in activities with their peers. Two steps are crucial to individualizing small group activities—planning and doing. While these steps may seem like common sense, it takes skill and practice to approach activities with individualizing for each child in mind.

## PLANNING

Planning begins with reflection on what you already know about each child's interests, experiences, and abilities to imagine how he or she may participate in a given activity. Observations of children in other daily activities can help you anticipate what each child might need to get involved. As you plan, it may help to ask yourself the following questions:

- Which materials best meet the needs and interests of each child involved?
- How can I arrange the materials and equipment to encourage each child's participation?
- How can the activity be more accessible to each child?
- What can I do so children can come and go from the activity at their own pace?

If you are planning a painting activity, for example, you may choose two colors of paint because previously several of the children were interested in mixing colors. You may also offer the choice of finger painting as well as brush painting or provide adapted paint brushes because one child has difficulty holding a brush. The physical layout for painting will address the child who needs to sit as well as those who can stand at the easel. To provide access to the activity, you may have paint available on a table as well as the easel so children can readily reach it. Finally, you design the activity and the clean up so it is easy for children to finish the activity on their individual time line.

## DOING

The key to the second step—doing—is to develop a flexible response to children's behavior while they are engaged in the activity and make immediate changes as you observe a need. You may offer another paint color if children are discovering what happens when red paint is mixed with white paint. Likewise, you may lower the easel so that a child who is tired of standing can sit and paint. These immediate changes are easier when you have access to additional materials, and when you have planned the activity knowing that you want the flexibility to respond to children's changing interests and needs.

Children thrive in an environment that offers possibilities for individual success in the midst of every experience, and that is the purpose of individualizing. Designing individualized group activities is an art form that is practiced and perfected by experienced teachers who believe that individualizing is the key that allows every child to learn by doing.

## Try It Out

You can set up stringing beads as an individualized activity by providing different kinds and sizes of "strings" and "beads." By choosing materials that address the interests and needs of children across age and ability levels, you offer:

- ✓ chances for each child to be successful.
- ✓ challenge for children at a range of developmental levels.
- ✓ opportunities for children to use both small and large motor skills.

To show children how to begin, you may want to start a few "strings" of "beads" and leave them lying around the area. The following suggestions for "strings" and "beads" are grouped from most challenging to least challenging.

Ideas for "Strings"	Ideas for "Beads"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ fishing line</li> <li>▶ yarn or string</li> <li>▶ shoe laces</li> <li>▶ leather cord</li> <li>▶ plastic wrapped wire</li> <li>▶ rope with taped ends</li> <li>▶ <math>\frac{1}{4}</math> - <math>\frac{1}{2}</math>" nylon tubing</li> <li>▶ lengths of hose</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ buttons</li> <li>▶ beads of various sizes</li> <li>▶ macaroni noodles</li> <li>▶ giant manicotti noodles</li> <li>▶ empty paper towel rolls, cut in 2" sections</li> <li>▶ short lengths of PVC pipe</li> <li>▶ frozen juice or other cans, ends cut out</li> </ul>

## A Child Care Provider's Question

**QUESTION:** *I don't have a degree in special education so while I understand it is important to individualize—and I want to—I'm not sure how to design an activity to include a child with a disability.*

**ANSWER:** First of all, you are not designing a different activity you are simply making modifications that will allow each child to participate in a meaningful way. But there are some things that will help you decide what you can do to meet the needs of an individual child. First, ask people who know the child well to get an idea of what kinds of play experiences have been successful. This is especially useful if the child is new to your program.

Most importantly, take your cues from the child. Spend time observing the child's behavior to see what he or she enjoys, what kinds of skills are used easily, and what types of toys seem to be most interesting. If you observe the child busily involved in a play activity in the block area, for example, figure out what makes that activity so successful and try to recreate that strategy in a group activity. Or, if during mealtime you notice that the child loves to experience the squishy textures of food, try to embed the same sensory experience in a group activity. In most cases, children's behavior will give you the information you

need in planning the activity, and by watching each child's response to what you have planned, you will know if something needs to change.

Never assume that a child cannot participate. Adopt a mindset that says every child can be involved and then find ways that the activity can be modified to reflect each child's developmental abilities and interests.

Be willing to engage in trial and error. You may not know what will engage a child, but you can try a few different ideas to see if any of them work. Do not consider the activity a failure because one or more of the children do not participate. Just keep making minor changes in materials, physical layout, or access to play and watch what happens.

