

# Understanding and Accepting Differences: Why Can't Maria Walk?



*All children can benefit when those with special needs are included in classrooms and activities. Teachers and parents can use these suggestions to foster understanding between children who have disabilities and those who do not.*



## **Model positive interaction with children who have special needs.**

- Interact directly with the child rather than with aides or helpers. Smile, laugh, talk (or sign), and play with the child often, just as with other children.
- Show that you will not rush a child who needs a slower pace.



## **Share information with the class about a child's particular disability.**

- Find out about the child's disability from books, articles, or videos. The child's parents may welcome a chance to help you and his classmates understand him and his special needs. Maybe the child will want to explain her situation.
- Provide a simple but accurate explanation. "Maria uses a wheelchair because she was born with a condition called cerebral palsy. It keeps her from walking, but she can think just fine." "The muscles in Jamal's throat don't always do what he wants them to."
- Help children understand what it is like to have special needs. For example, "Children with special needs play, go to school, and have fun. They like to have friends. Sometimes they need special teachers or assistants to help them learn and keep them safe. Sometimes they need medicine or special equipment. The equipment won't hurt them, or you. They get to decide if someone else can touch it."
- Clear up mistaken ideas as soon as you notice them. Does a child think that a classmate with a disability is simply not trying, that someone forgot to show her how to do things, or that the disability is contagious? You might say, "Maria was born with cerebral palsy. It affects what her body can do. We won't catch it like we catch colds."



## **Suggest ways for preschoolers of various abilities to relate to one another.**

- "It's okay to offer to help Katie. But it's also okay for her to say, 'No, thanks.'"
- "It's okay for you to ask Maria why she can't walk. But it's also okay for her to say that she doesn't want to talk about it."
- "It's okay to use words like 'listen' or 'see' or 'walk,' even around children who can't hear or see or walk."
- "You can ask Jamal politely to repeat his words if you didn't understand him."
- "Please give Jamal time to speak for himself."
- "Maria's service dog is working right now. It's not okay to pet him."
- "Remember that Katie said she likes to play bounce and catch? You can invite her to play—here's the ball!"



## **For related Web resources, see "Understanding and Accepting Differences: Why Can't Maria Walk?" at <http://illinoisearlylearning.org/tips.htm>**

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Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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