

## Children with Special Needs

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All children are welcome at My Gym. We never want to make a child with special needs feel “different” or discriminated against. We also want to ensure that our program is run at the highest level of quality for everyone in attendance. These guidelines exist to guide My Gym teachers in creating an environment that is inclusive, safe and enjoyable for children of all abilities.

### IMPORTANT NOTES:

- This document is focused on neurodevelopmental special needs, e.g., autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, neurodiversity, etc. These are the most common special needs that My Gymers encounter on a daily basis.
  - o Neurodiversity is such a wide category that it does encompass children that can participate in the My Gym program without any difficulty.
  - o Furthermore, some neurodiversity’s may or may not be classified as a “disability” by the ADA. But, since we are not trained to identify these variances, and to act with caution and sensitivity, our protocol applies to all neurodiversity’s.
- Of course, children with other disabilities, physical or otherwise, are welcome at My Gym. You will need to learn from the parents how to best work with these children case by case.
- We advise all My Gyms to start 1-2 Super Stars programs (must submit an Ancillary Application to MGE first – see Operations Manual). This is an ancillary class for children with special needs. There are many benefits to offering this program.
- These guidelines are focused on children who are 3 ½ and older and can participate in programs independently (parent in lobby). In parent participation programs, the parent is responsible for supervising their child at all times, so children with special needs are assisted by their parents always.
- These guidelines apply to any program in which a child may participate independently (classes, camps, PNOs, parties, etc.).

### Step 1: Become informed

- The ADA (American Disabilities Act) is the legislature that ensures that people with disabilities have equal opportunities and are not discriminated against. The US government’s ADA website has specific instructions and guidelines for childcare centers. Although My Gym is not a licensed childcare center, the material is still great guidance for the My Gym model.
- Here is an excerpt with information most applicable to My Gym:
  - o **Basic obligations**
    - **Childcare providers must:**
      - *Make an individualized assessment about whether they can meet the particular needs of a child with a disability.*
      - *Make reasonable modifications to their policies and practices to allow for children with disabilities to participate.*

*Here are examples of some common reasonable modifications:*

- ❖ *Change a toilet training policy to assist a child with Down Syndrome who, because of her disability, requires assistance with going to the bathroom.*
- ❖ *Change a discipline policy to ensure that a child with autism has equal access to the program with appropriate support. For example, train staff to aid the child in deescalating behavior when the child acts out.*
- ❖ *Change a medication policy so that a trained staff person may assist a child with diabetes in the administration of insulin, Glucagon, or any life-saving medication as well as assist in an emergency.*
- *Provide appropriate aids and services needed to effectively communicate with children or adults with disabilities.*
  - ❖ *If a childcare center is closing early because of bad weather, that may mean using different methods—not just calls but emails or text messages—to communicate with deaf or hard of hearing parents or guardians.*
  - ❖ *If a childcare center is using websites or parent portals to keep parents informed concerning their child's participation in the program, all such technology must be accessible to those with hearing, vision, or speech disabilities (for example, those who use screen readers).*
- *Make sure physical spaces are accessible. Remove architectural barriers that interfere with or prevent children from fully participating (or parents, guardians, or prospective customers with disabilities) if removing the barriers is readily achievable, meaning if it can be easily accomplished without much difficulty or expense.*
  - ❖ *For example, installing grab bars in toilet stalls or replacing playground pea gravel with ADA-compliant materials.*
- **Childcare providers must not:**
  - *Exclude a child with a disability from their programs based on the disability or separate that child from their nondisabled peers. Example:*
    - ❖ *A childcare center cannot turn away or isolate a child because the child has intellectual disabilities.*
    - ❖ *The center must instead take steps to integrate that child into every activity available to other children, including participation in extra-curricular activities and field trips.*

- *Exclude children with disabilities from their programs unless their presence would pose a direct threat to the health or safety of others or fundamentally alter the nature of the program.*

- To learn more, please search “ADA for childcare centers” on the web.

### **Step 2: Always respond with kindness, compassion, and the child’s best interest**

- Your role is to support the parent and child and to make the best advisements so the child can participate in our programs within our framework.
- Always be supportive and kind.

### **Step 3: Ask about special needs**

- The most important part of this entire process is knowledge and awareness; therefore, every new parent who enrolls should be asked if their child has any special needs that the My Gym team should be aware of.
  - Example: *Does XXX have any special needs you want to tell us about – something that would help us ensure he has the best experience?*
  - Note: Neurodiversity is a very wide category. There is conflicting information as to whether all neurodiversity’s are considered disabilities. You may encounter a parent that feels like it is a disability, while another may not. Be sensitive to this and speak to the parent about what may be best for the child’s enjoyment and safety in the program.
- Problems can usually be traced back to this simple step not having been performed. Trying to handle this situation retroactively can cause issues because of the parent’s unmet expectations or lack of understanding about the ADA act.

### **Step 4: Inform the parent**

- Inform the parent of the next steps:
  - Of course, we welcome the child in our gym and program.
  - Inform the parent that My Gym is a private small business, and My Gym teachers are not trained on special needs or working with children with special needs. We recognize, however, that My Gym is a great environment for all children, so we are happy to work with the parent to ensure this is a great experience for all.
  - Let the parent know that they (or an aide) will need to participate on the floor with the child (even in non-parent participation classes) – Reasons:
    - So that an “individualized assessment” can be made – This assessment period takes 2-4 weeks.
    - For the safety of their child as well as the other children in attendance – It is not possible for either of the 2 My Gym teachers on the shift to supervise the child to the level needed.
  - React to the parent:
    - Most parents understand and oblige.
    - If the parent requests not to come onto the floor:
      - *I understand your concerns. Let me assure you that we want nothing more than what is best for (child’s name possessive) interests. An “individualized assessment” is specifically what is required by the American Disabilities Act... so we are simply following their steps.*

- If the parent requests special attention, a dedicated teacher, smaller class sizes, etc., any “special accommodations” as the parent interprets them:
  - *I understand your concerns. Let me assure you that we want nothing more than what is best for (child’s name). We will do what we can to ensure (child) has a great, safe experience, and we can certainly make special accommodations to ensure that. But adding another teacher or reducing class size would directly put our small business under hardships, as described by the ADA. The reasonable accommodations we are able and happy to make are that we will hold an individualized assessment, and we will permit you or an aide to be on the floor to assist (child). We will also make small alterations to the curriculum as needed when it’s (child’s) turn.*
- Inform the parent that we would love (child) to participate independently, but it is possible that (child) will require a parent or aide on the floor for the duration of their enrollment. We will know more in the next few weeks.

#### **Step 5: Partner with the parent**

- Each “individualized assessment” will be different, so please remember to partner with the parent early on to ensure your classes are safe, fun, and appropriate for all children.
- Over the course of 2-4 classes, perform the “individualized assessment.”
  - You will be assessing the ability of the child to participate independently and follow the instructions from the teachers. This is vital, as a child who constantly runs off from the structured activities may not be spotted by the 2 instructors and would have a high likelihood of injuring him/herself or another child. Children of any ability can never be left to roam around independently during structured activities.
  - The assessment takes place during the course of normal My Gym classes.
  - The assessment is simply an observation by the 2 teachers on the shift using their “overall eye.” The teachers will be observing all of the children as is normal in any My Gym class, and the child with special needs is included.
  - There are no forms to complete, and under no circumstances should the child ever be aware that they are being assessed. There should not be any forms, a clipboard, or obvious focus on the child being assessed. They must experience the program as any other child would.
  - The teachers on the shift will run the curriculum as planned.
  - The parent will participate with their child and help them throughout the program as needed. This could be literally helping them every second or only when the child needs it here and there.
  - Under no circumstances should a My Gym teacher single out the child, mention to the class that the child needs additional help, or separate the child from the group, etc. They must be allowed to participate as do all of the other children, with the exception of having a parent or aide present on the floor with them.
  - After each class, connect with the parent and be honest. Examples:
    - *Seems like all went pretty well today! This assessment process takes 2-4 weeks, so we look forward to seeing you both next week when we will connect after class again. Did you have any questions for us?*
    - *I think this went pretty well, but it did seem like Joey needed a lot of guidance from you today... Thank you so much! You did great, and I*

*think Joey got a ton out of the class! We'll see you next week, and we will connect again after class. Did you have any questions for us?*

- *Seems like Joey had a very difficult time following the curriculum and instruction, but that's OK... It still seemed like he got a lot out of the program, right? And we appreciate your help in keeping him and the other kids safe. We'll see you next week, and we will connect again after class. Did you have any questions for us?*
- At the end of the 2-4 week "initial assessment" period, choose one of these options based on the child's ability to follow the program, their level of safety, and the level of safety of the children and teachers present:
  - Child may participate independently.
    - Inform the parent that their child may participate independently. He/she follows the program well enough, and there are no concerns about safety of the children or the teachers.
  - Further assessment needed/ Parent's (or aide's) participation is required.
    - Inform the parent that their child did great, but there are instances when the child runs off or needs additional assistance, so the parent should continue to plan to participate with them for the next month. The teachers present will not be able to spot the child while teaching the curriculum and overseeing the rest of the children, so the parent will need to continue to be on the floor. We can always assess along the way.

#### **Step 6: Check in with the parent**

- Check in regularly with the parent on the child's:
  - Enjoyment of the program
  - Progress
  - Safety
- Check in with the parent immediately if the parent/ aide is not supervising the child properly. Not checking in with the parent on this issue can cause serious safety issues for the child or other children and create class control problems. Examples:
  - The parent/ aide refuses to come on the floor (in which case the child may also not come on the floor).
  - The parent/ aide comes on the floor but is not attentive and lets the child play independently during structured activities.
  - The parent/ aide is not helping the child follow the structure of the class.
  - The parent/ aide does not stop the child from being physical or handsy with other children.

#### **Potential questions, comments, and requests**

- *Parent: You are required to provide reasonable accommodations... I want another teacher to be added instead of having me supervise him.*
  - *My Gymer: While I wish we could do that, we are a very small business with only 5-6 TOTAL employees... so adding an instructor in every class where a child with special needs is participating would put us under an "extreme hardship" as described by the ADA act. We would not be able to operate... but we are happy to make the following reasonable accommodations:*
    - *We performed an individualized assessment.*
    - *We are also happy to allow you or an aide on the floor to assist (child).*

- *We will also make small alterations to the curriculum as needed when it's (child's) turn. I assure you he will not be pointed out or notice anything.*
- *Parent: My goal is to integrate Joey into class.*
  - *My Gymer: That is our hope and goal as well! But we can't rush the process, so let's see how it goes, and we will discuss Joey's progress after each class. I do want to prepare you that it is possible that Joey will always need an aide in class... This is for his safety, as our teachers cannot spot Joey if he is not participating during structured parts of the program. Someone must spot him to ensure he does not get hurt. But fingers crossed all goes well... We'll know soon enough.*
- *Parent: I don't want to go on the floor with my child.*
  - *My Gymer: For safety reasons, children in non-parent participation classes are not allowed to play freely on the equipment during structured activities. In our assessment, we both observed that (child) could not follow the instructions from the teachers without assistance... That is why we made the reasonable accommodation to allow him to participate with a parent or aide. If you are unable to come on the floor, I'm sorry, but (child) cannot come on the floor either. Our hope is that, in time, you won't need to come on the floor with him... but we are not there yet.*

#### **"Discipling" Children with Special Needs**

- When a child participates in class independent of the parent (no parent on the floor):
  - Follow the 5-Step Discipline Protocol as it is described in the "Discipline Protocol – Tips and Tactics" protocol located on the Operations Manual.
  - All normal discipline procedures apply.
  - Speak to and "partner with the parent" if a child with special needs is unable to participate independently.
  - For the safety of all of the children, a parent/aide may need to join/rejoin the child on the floor if the child is unable to follow the structured curriculum.
- When the child is participating with their parent or aide (in any aged program):
  - Even though this document is titled "Disciplining Protocol - Children with Special Needs" there is no direct disciplining of children with special needs by the My Gym teacher when their parent/aide is supervising them.
  - Since My Gyms are not trained to work with children with special needs, and because we accept all children with any special needs, it would be impossible to create a set of guidelines to address discipline as it pertains to every special need that exists. Therefore, all matters relating to discipline will be handled by the parent.

Please contact [support@mygym.com](mailto:support@mygym.com) with any questions.