



ACCIDENTAL EXPERT

Sharing Skill Sets for Success

By Rachele Hosten, Executive Director, Kidnastics, Inc.

Twenty years ago, few children with a disability were in classrooms with typical peers. I remember those days well. Today's child with a challenge is, hopefully, more readily welcomed. But it is specifically the inclusion of children with special needs in the gymnastic setting that I am very passionate about. That's what my program – Kidnastics Inc. – is all about.

As a career gymnastics coach, I have always tried to make the gym accessible for everyone. I am fortunate and proud to have the backing of a terrific club – the East York Gymnastics Club – a state-of-the-art facility where national champions train with an incredible array of coaches, alongside recreational gymnasts. Our team has made it possible for me to accommodate children with special needs in the gym. Alone, I simply would not have been able to properly support the children and their unique needs. It has been a learning journey for us all.

While inclusion is a supposed reality today, it's often a challenge for families and organizations to find a harmonious set up for their child. Here, I feel like a pioneer. I believe there is room somehow, some way, for most participants. Supported inclusion is the way of the future. Yes we can.

Many barriers to inclusion are obvious but can be managed. For us in the gym, extra staff or matting, modified programs, equipment or timing, or simply some creativity, often suffice to solve a situation. Solutions are usually quite simple. We manage risks with common sense in tandem with recommendations from families.

In a nutshell, the best practices employed by Kidnastics Inc. are borrowed from traditional artistic gymnastics training principles and advice from educators and medical professionals, and then integrated to support inclusion. An informed interdisciplinary approach allows for optimal participation and a chance to practice and promote cog-

nitive and motor skill development, build physical capacity, boost communication and social skills, gain exposure to an array of exciting stimuli, and engage, strive, and play while having fun.

While a child with a special need may not be a national competitor, they can and do improve their own level of physical competence with exposure to a fun and supported program. And, their involvement inspires others. Everyone benefits from supported

opportunities to participate in the general community.

While physical boundaries are being redefined, there are the invisible barriers to contend with. Sometimes language cannot bridge understanding, and people are truly at a loss about how to accommodate a child outside of a clinical or educational setting. Many children on the autism spectrum may present with behaviours that are not safe in a gym for themselves or others. A child may require specialized support that gym staff cannot perform without additional arrangements being made. Overwhelmed parents may be angry at typical ignorance of their reality. Financing accommodations can be costly; funding can be problematic and also embarrassing for families. Sometimes, issues go undisclosed or undeclared.

In that silent void, assumptions abound, and hope can be dashed. The figuring-out process can be a challenge.

Kidnastics Inc. is involved in exploring the complex logistics that promote participation, specifically by developing multidisciplinary professional partnerships that foster competent inclusion and personal dignity. This season I'm thrilled to finally have established the framework of an Advisory Council, headed by a leading developmental pediatrician, with a team of physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech and language pathologists, and educators, policy makers, and of course parents. My goal is for us to

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work collaboratively to pass helpful, practical knowledge to the frontline for implementation. I'm trying to give a voice to the right of a child with a special need to enjoy the gym, to share in successes and disappointments, and to find joy. Kidnastics aims to find a way to include, support, and encourage participants, and increase community awareness about the nature of inclusion, as well as fostering professional, safe solutions to challenges and barriers to a child's participation.

It took me years of struggle to find useful information that would actually help a person – me – on the front line. I found many of the inclusion guidelines to be somewhat patronizing and frankly, useless; soft suggestion like “work at their pace” did not offer a clear pathway to success. There was not one course or book to answer my specific questions. So, I painstakingly cobbled together information over many seasons, and from several disciplines. Then I integrated some elements with coaching principles to develop the skill set I needed. I am a stubborn coach, so failure was not an option. I pushed hard to test the limits of inclusion with my clients. Inclusion occurs in many forms, as long as the first place is in the heart, and may look different at different times. And actually, it is often really quite fun.

At East York, I am delighted to see the emerging relationships between typical children and children with a challenge. We all share line-ups at the water fountain. I have noticed that when I give my typical students the opportunity to support a child with a challenge, they have risen to the occasion as fine young citizens. Children can be honest, very accepting and protective, and in a sense, ‘not care’ about the supposed problem. They just engage one another in childish fashion. Typical kids are usually fine with a positive message that it is okay that our teammate is different. Difference is celebrated.

Gymnastics is an incredible sport, for both spectators and participants of all ages. I was first smitten as a child by Russia's Olga Korbut, and this enduring passion led me toward a competitive coaching career. Such athletes inspire participation, and when inspired, one can try, and through trial, experience both frustration and growth. As a sport, gymnastics

is suitable for most children, including those with a special need. It provides children with the opportunity to learn basics like how to move their body, to strive, play, and build their physical and social skill capacity while having fun in a fabulous, stimulating environment. The positive impact gymnastics can offer in the quality of anyone's life is truly immeasurable. I consider gymnastics a gateway sport; a physical foundation can be set.

I was, and continue to be, disturbed at how challenging it is to share the skills needed to truly support a child with a special need toward excellence. The learning curve to understand the medical and multidisciplinary therapeutic and educational recommendations was a hurdle I had to overcome by hardcore study. I'm just a coach, so I hit the books, attended courses and conferences, and liaised with diverse professionals. I've been listening. To best serve a child, knowledge is power, and when I have access to a multidisciplinary team, I'm able to provide optimal programs. While I respect and understand privacy laws, I confess annoyance by the conundrum of roadblocks they create from a point of logistics. For parents that just want inclusion for their child, I understand that disclosure is a contentious issue for many reasons, one being possible rejection.

Sometimes inclusion is simple from day one. I use a tiered approach, from solo participation toward inclusion in a partnership or small group. Group inclusion is not for everyone. Some children prefer private or semi private sessions. After 34 years in the gym, I'm

bold enough to declare myself as having enough experience to figure out the obvious, but some interventions do require the guidance of specialists.

I love science! I hate science!

We need science! For the best interests of my students with a special need, I am counting on the availability of the best information, and I am focused on developing a more professional relationship with the medical community to foster the partnerships needed for their patients.

My first strategy 20 years ago was crisis management. Like most coaches I had no clue how to interact with a child with a special need in the gymnastic setting when nuanced accommodations were required. At first, I too was overwhelmed, and skeptical about possible



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outcomes. There was a lot to implement after consulting with professionals, and it was a scary challenge. After stepping up to the task of coaching, without prejudice, with the team input, I was shocked to see how many kids responded beyond expectations. Yes, the training process had to be modified, and well thought out, but it was worth it.

I find it intriguing that, according to parents, there are doctors and therapists that recommend gymnastics and trampoline activity for children on the autism spectrum, and for a variety of developmental disabilities. Yet, despite hearsay recommendations, I have not, as a gymnastics and trampoline career coach, been able to find guiding literature related to such recommendations. While most of the children have had wonderful successful experiences, I will never forget the children that did not. I've let a few children down due to capacity issues. I am developing tools for other coaches, and am determined to collaborate to find and share pragmatic knowledge. Families and children report benefits to me, and I have witnessed some life transforming improvements first-hand, but no doctor or therapist has ever, to my knowledge, instructed coaches about how to work with their patients.

I'm a humble coach. I respect doctors. After struggling for years to figure out how to accommodate an array of special needs in the gym, I'm an accidental expert. As an able-bodied coach of champions, I had the privilege of blind sight. However, the cumulative experience from coaching over 100 special children at East York Gymnastics has opened my eyes to complex issues of exclusion and inclusion, and inspired me to develop programs geared for this population with essential new partnerships. The time has come.

We are blessed to be living in marvelous times, and technological advancements and the impact of science has been enormous. Many children with a special need today are pioneers in integration, and sharing privileged

information with a cutting-edge interdisciplinary team seems to me to be the best way to prepare ourselves to meet this challenge with appropriate guidelines.

There are great debates about many issues, but as a coach, they are not mine to solve. It is my hope to have the type of work I do get studied by science, to guide the future and delivery of better services. But whether or not speech and language development, sensory activity or motor planning ever get studied and proven to be impacted by gymnastics activity, I still want to engage in safe supportable gymnastics with informed best practices in cooperation with the multidisciplinary medical community for the sake of the children I coach. One thing most of us agree on is that children of all ability levels benefit from the rigors of physical activity, laughter, and friendship in the gymnastics setting.



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