(AS-00)

Disability Awareness Month

ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS

The Disability Awareness Month 2003 theme is "Ability. No matter how you spell it." The text of the poster reads, "It means the power to achieve. And that's what 54 million Americans with disabilities are doing – they are working, living independently and creating positive changes. There may be only one correct spelling of the word 'ability,' but there's more than one way to spell it out." The poster and other materials, such as bookmarks, stickers and buttons, show a student who is deaf participating in a spelling bee by using sign language.

Could this really happen? Could a student who is deaf really participate – even win – a school spelling bee? Absolutely, and it's been done before. As explained in the discussion suggestions for children on the next page, it can be done with the aid of an interpreter. Although students who are deaf cannot hear the word they are to spell, they work with interpreters beforehand to create special signs for words that don't already have a sign. That extra effort equals success for students like Kaley Ann Graves, a 14-year-old with a hearing impairment who last year finished in the top 25 at the Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee. There are similar examples on page two.

The theme emphasizes that everyone in society has something unique and important to contribute. People with disabilities often find attitudinal barriers – people's assumptions and misconceptions about disability – more difficult to surmount than physical barriers such as stairs and curbs. The theme reminds people that overcoming attitudinal barriers will contribute to greater achievement for people both with and without disabilities.

Following are suggested activities to help explain the message of Disability Awareness Month 2003 to children, teenagers and adults. Many of the activities and discussions can be adapted for any age group, but these are broken into the three age groups to assist you in planning your Disability Awareness Month activities.

CHILDREN

Discussion

In a group, lead children in a discussion about their abilities. Ask, “What do you do best?” Children might respond with different sports, school subjects, chores, etc. Next, ask children if they could still do that activity if they had a disability. Although children may initially respond with “no” for some activities, urge them to consider ways to adapt the activity to accommodate different types of disabilities, such as being deaf, blind, unable to walk, etc.

Next, ask children if a student with a disability could win a spelling bee. What if the child was deaf? Tell children that many people with disabilities excel in a variety of activities, including spelling bees. Although students who are deaf cannot hear the word they are to spell, they work with interpreters beforehand to create special signs for words that don’t already have a sign. That extra effort equals success for students like Kaley Ann Graves, a 14-year-old with a hearing impairment who last year finished in the top 25 at the Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee. Other examples include:

- In 1996, 11-year-old Jimmy McCarthy, who is deaf, finished in the top 100 at the Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee after winning his regional, state and school bees. He was the first contestant to be profoundly deaf.

- Eleven-year-old Katie Moore, who is deaf, won her school spelling bee in 2000 by correctly spelling “expectant,” a word for which there is no sign. Her translator signed “expect” and then used the word in a sentence to help Moore understand the word she should spell. Moore later qualified for the state bee.

- In 2002, 14-year-old Kayla Marie Withers, who is blind, won state honors in the Pennsylvania Statewide Spelling Bee. She participated in the Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee, making it to round two of the competition.

- In 2001, sixth grader Erica Olson won her school spelling bee with the word “calendar.” She represented her school at the district bee, where she was the only competitor who was deaf.

Tell the children that, like them, people with disabilities have talents and skills. Encourage children to have a positive attitude about disability and to focus on the many things a person with a disability *can* do.

Speaker

Invite a sign language interpreter or a person who is deaf to talk to the class about his or her experiences. The speaker could discuss how people who are deaf overcome the barriers and challenges they face. He or she also could teach some common phrases in sign language, give children tips for interacting with people with disabilities, such as when to offer assistance and what kinds of vocabulary to use when speaking to and about people with disabilities. Before the speaker arrives, ask children to write down any questions they have; encourage them to ask the speaker these questions. Also allow time for children to ask any additional questions that arise.

Activity

1. Organize a spelling bee, asking children to spell age-appropriate words that deal specifically with *ability*. For example, words might include activities such as "soccer" or "baseball" and talents such as "sing," "piano" or "write." As far in advance as possible, distribute a list of words for children to study; this ensures that children with disabilities can prepare to participate. Give a prize or certificate to the winning child. Then remind children that every word they have spelled from the long list is something a person with a disability *can* do, because people with disabilities have many talents and skills to share.

2. Sort children into groups of four or five. Give each child several slips of paper with age-appropriate words or phrases to communicate to the rest of the group. The catch: they must do so *in silence* making gestures, drawing pictures or using other methods. When each child has communicated two or three words/phrases to his or her group, ask children which were the hardest to guess. Remind them that people who are deaf live in silence every day, but they have developed an entire language – sign language – to help them overcome the communications challenges the children faced. In addition, people with other disabilities are always creating new, exciting ways to participate in the community.

3. Have children use yellow and black construction paper to make a paper bee. If time allows, provide wiggly plastic eyes, pipe cleaners for antenna, etc. Tell children that this is their "spelling bee," and ask them to glue the bee to a piece of craft paper. On the same paper,

have children write out (or help them to write out) their names vertically on the page. Then, ask children to "fill in the blanks," writing down activities at which they excel – or even just their favorite things – for each letter of their name. For example, a child named Ashley might write: "Apple pie; Soccer; Helping my mom; Listening to music; Elephants; Yellow." When children are finished, display the work on a bulletin board. Remind children that, if they had a disability, they would like the same things and want to participate in the same activities.

4. Give children construction paper and ask them to draw and decorate a picture of themselves doing an activity at which they excel. Allow each child to present his or her drawing to the class. During the presentations, prompt the children to explain how they could excel at that activity if they had a disability. When all children have had the opportunity to present, assemble the drawings into a "What I'm Good At" booklet to display in the classroom.

5. Teach children to spell their names using the sign language alphabet. Display a chart or distribute a hand-out for reference as they learn. (For an easy reference guide, visit www.handspeak.com.) When students have learned to spell their names, place them into pairs and ask them to take turns signing simple words while the other child "listens" and guesses the words.

6. Read children a short story about disability that relates to the 2003 Disability Awareness Month theme. Check with your public or school librarian to select an appropriate book, or choose one of the following options:
   - *Moses Goes to a Concert* or *Moses Goes to School* by Isaac Millman
   - *I'm Deaf and It's Okay* by Lorraine Aseltine, et al
   - *Dad and Me in the Morning* by Pat Larkin
   - *A Button in Her Ear* or *Words in Our Hands* by Ada Bassett Litchfield

   When you finish the book, discuss how children feel about the experiences of the character who is deaf. What have they learned about disability? Remind children that people with disabilities are just like everyone else and they want to be included in the same projects and activities.

TEENAGERS

Discussion

Initiate a discussion among teenagers about their goals for the future – which career they want to pursue, where they would like to live, what type of family life they would like to have, and similar questions. Next, ask how an acquired disability would affect those plans. For example, how would they achieve their goals if a car accident caused paralysis? Or, do they think they would have different goals if they had been born with a disability? What if, like the child on the 2003 Disability Awareness Month poster, they were deaf? Ask them to consider how they would overcome physical and attitudinal barriers to achieve their goals.

Remind teens that for 54 million Americans, this is not a hypothetical situation. We can help people with disabilities reach their goals by breaking down physical and attitudinal barriers we observe. Remind the teenagers that people with disabilities are people first, and it is important to focus on their *abilities* with a positive attitude.

Speaker

Identify and invite a speaker with a disability to talk to the group. A local government, political, entertainment, sports or high-profile business personality would make a positive impact, as would a fellow teenager. Remember that your "speaker" could be one who is deaf or has a hearing impairment.

The speaker could address a variety of topics, including tips on how to interact with people with disabilities. Ask him or her to discuss challenges he or she faces and how those challenges can be overcome. Allow time for teens to ask questions and interact with the speaker.

Activity

1. Engage teens in doing some Internet research to find names of people who are deaf or have other disabilities and who have been successful in local and national competitions such as spelling bees or in high profile careers like acting, politics, science, music etc. Have teens report their findings to the group. Then discuss any accommodations or adaptations made so the person with a disability could participate. Remind students that people with disabilities face many barriers – both physical and attitudinal – in society today; if we work together to

overcome those barriers, we will see even more accomplishments by people who are deaf and/or have other disabilities.

2. Arrange a volunteer project for teenagers that requires them to work alongside, *not for*, people with disabilities. For example, teens and people with disabilities could share a shift at a shelter or soup kitchen or could work together to raise money for a good cause. To form such a partnership, contact organizations such as your local Independent Living Center, university office of disability services or community service providers. Or, contact any other local disability organization, and see if staff members have ideas of their own for the project.

3. Divide teens into groups of five and have members of each team count off, one through five, so that each group has one "one," one "two," etc. Provide each group with about 40 straws and some Scotch tape, and inform teens that they must build the largest possible free-standing structure, using only these materials. (The structure may not be attached to a floor, table or other foundation.) Now, inform the teens that you will be assigning each person a "disability" as follows:

   - Ones – May not use their thumbs. (You might want to tape their thumbs to their hands using masking tape.)
   - Twos – Must keep their dominant hand/arm behind their back at all times.
   - Threes – May not talk.
   - Fours – Must wear a blindfold. (Distribute these to the groups.)
   - Fives – This member will not have a disability. (Note: If groups have fewer than five members, a member should fill this role instead of one of the others.)

   Allow about 20 minutes to work and then award prizes to members of the group with the largest free-standing structure. Ask students who had "disabilities" how they felt about the project. Were they frustrated? Did other group members ask for their input? Often, the greatest barrier to participation is that other group members assume a person with a certain disability cannot contribute to the group. How could people with each type of "disability" have contributed to the project? Remind teens that people with disabilities face challenges like these every day. If we have a positive attitude about disability, and focus on the many things people with disabilities *can* do, we can help them to participate more fully in the

community. *Source: "A Perfect Fit: 4-H Involvement for Youth with Disabilities," Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service (1996).*

4. Encourage students to write a short story, essay, play, speech or poem about the Disability Awareness Month 2003 theme, "Ability. No matter how you spell it." Students could also create a piece of artwork or a photo essay. Hold a contest and offer a prize for the piece that best conveys the Disability Awareness Month message.

5. Send teens on a video scavenger hunt. (Or, consider a Polaroid scavenger hunt.) Give participants a list of disability-related items to film. Include both positive and negative items. Examples include:

   - Sidewalks – Are there curb cuts? Would any cracks and/or holes in the sidewalk obstruct the passage of a wheelchair?
   - Building entrances – Do stairs have alternative wheelchair ramps nearby? Are doors wide enough to permit a wheelchair to pass through? Is the door heavy or difficult to open?
   - Bathrooms – Are accessible stalls equipped with bars on the walls? Are stalls large enough to accommodate a wheelchair?
   - Building miscellaneous – Are water fountains placed low enough for a person who is sitting to use them? Do directories, elevator buttons, room number signs, etc. include Braille lettering? Does the elevator make a noise when it passes each floor? Are hallways wide and free of obstructions?
   - Accessible parking – Are accessible spaces as close as possible to the entrance? Are vehicles parked in these spaces marked with the appropriate hanging tags or license plates?

   Offer a small prize for the student or team who finishes first or finds the best example of each item. Discuss the positive and negative aspects of accessibility for people with disabilities in your community. Brainstorm ways to increase awareness about accessibility issues and decide how the group can help solve the issues. Consider notifying your local newspaper about your discoveries, write a letter and/or petition to the mayor or city/town council, or volunteer to fix the problem if possible. Working together, your group can help overcome the physical and attitudinal barriers that affect people with disabilities.

ADULTS

Discussion

Initiate a discussion among adults about their interactions with people with disabilities. Have they ever worked in a group with a person who had a disability – A person who is deaf? A person who uses a wheelchair? Ask how this interaction made them feel and encourage them to be honest about any feelings of discomfort or unease. Why did they feel this way? What stereotypes do they believe – and what attitudes do they have – about people with disabilities? When have they seen such stereotypes contradicted?

Encourage group members to realize that people with disabilities are just like everyone else. They have thoughts, feelings, goals, dreams, etc. How can group members help ensure that attitudinal and physical barriers in the community don't stand in the way of people with disabilities achieving their goals or dreams? Remind them that, as everyone participates in the life of the community, it inevitably benefits the entire community.

Speaker

Invite a speaker or panel of speakers, with and without disabilities, to talk to your group about ways to interact with people with disabilities. Remember that "speakers" could be people who are deaf or have a hearing impairment. They could discuss the correct language to use and the best way to offer assistance to a person with a disability. Or invite a person with a disability to share his or her personal experiences in the community. As an alternative, you could invite a speaker to discuss current disability issues, such as special education, home and community-based care initiatives, cochlear implants, employment, assistive technology, etc.

Activity

1. Organize volunteers to tutor local students with disabilities. For example, volunteers could assist students with learning disabilities or students who are deaf. Contact schools in your area to assess their special education needs. To ensure tutors feel prepared for their task, organize a workshop about how to interact with and assist students with disabilities. Contact local special education teachers to ask for their assistance and advice on how to proceed.

2. Contact a volunteer organization or a church group to partner for a community service and/or outreach project involving people with disabilities. This could include financial support or partnering with a disability organization for a service or advocacy project. To form such a partnership, contact local disability organizations such as an Independent Living Center, Area Agency on Aging, Rehabilitation Agency, or the Indiana School for the Deaf, Indiana Association of the Deaf or HEAR Indiana. Another project would be to organize a group to volunteer at a Special Olympics event in your community, helping people with disabilities to achieve the dream of athletic competition. Pick a volunteer project related to your values and interests.

3. Invite a guest from a local disability group or community service provider to demonstrate new technologies that have changed the lives of people with disabilities. Ask your guest to show and demonstrate assistive devices, explaining how and why they are used. When possible, explain how these devices – while intended for people with disabilities – might also help others who do not have disabilities. For instance, speech-to-text software for the computer can recognize speech and convert it to text in a word processing program. This is obviously helpful to those who are paralyzed and can not use their hands to type. But this same software can be valuable to those who can not type well (or fast), have a temporary impairment like recovery from minor surgery, etc.

   Some assistive devices are quite remarkable, so be sure to use your imagination when asking your guest what he or she can bring to your group.

4. Have a group of adults take photographs or video footage of your community, looking for both positive and negative aspects of accessibility for people with disabilities. The project could show, for example, that curb cuts are well maintained, but that some buildings do not have features like accessible restrooms. Submit your findings to local media, create a scrapbook or video montage, or prepare a display/presentation for local schools, libraries and/or community groups. Discuss ways your group could work to overcome the physical barriers people with disabilities face.

5. Post the Disability Awareness Month 2003 artwork in your place of business and seek inclusion of the theme and message in your company newsletter, Web site, billing statements, paycheck envelopes or bulletin board during March. You can even have the message placed on your postage machine for outgoing mail.

   For more information, request a free copy of the Council's "Increasing ADA Awareness through Your Business" from Kim Dennison at (317) 631-6400 (voice), (317) 631-6499 (fax) or kdennison@bjmpr.com (e-mail).