

STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN GROUP LESSONS

By Joe Huber

"Reality to an autistic person is a confusing, interacting mass of events, people, places, sounds and sights. There seems to be no clear boundaries, order or meaning to anything. A large part of my life is spent just trying to work out the pattern behind everything."

A PERSON WITH AUTISM

Did you ever take out a group lesson where the group was "reasonably" matched up as far as age, previous experience, and abilities, only to discover that one of your students was not fitting into any of the learning styles and preferences you were used to teaching? This student, unlike the rest of the group, may not be paying attention, might be a little disruptive, may be less coordinated compared to the rest of the group, or is having difficulty following the direction of the lesson. Welcome to the world of resort group lessons!

It happens every day. The hill supervisor assigns you to a group lesson. The group was established based upon some criteria, which usually includes age of students (i.e. different kids' ages, new skiers/riders, or level of skiing/riding abilities, etc.) But something does not seem right! We have all experienced it.

My home resort, Boston Mills/Brandywine (BMBW) in the Cleveland/Akron, Ohio area, teaches a lot of school ski clubs and groups every day. At 3:00 p.m., the buses start rolling in and it seems like they will never stop arriving . . . to the tune of 14,000 plus student lessons a week! We have a large staff of more than 250 ski/snowboard instructors who teach them. We encourage all of our instructors to obtain their Children's Specialist Certificate through PSIA-AASI Central Division. Approximately 40 percent of our staff has been recognized as being Children's Specialists through PSIA-AASI or as a BMBW Children's Specialist from our own in-house training program.

When it comes to being able to teach a group lesson for our school groups, we are confident that we will provide a safe, fun, quality lesson. That being said, how do we go about teaching the student who may have that special need in the group lesson?

First, if the school club or group advisor contacts the resort's Club Program Manager, and let's her/him know that they have a student with

special needs, we are then able to evaluate the student's needs from a skiing/snowboard lesson perspective. Then we can determine if the student would best benefit from being part of a group lesson or if some additional hands-on attention is required.

If we know about the special need ahead of time, we can handle most situations. Resources on our regular ski/snowboard staff include nine certified Adaptive instructors (five in cognitive), educators, special education teachers, members of the medical field (nurses, PTs, OTs, etc.)

Our BMBW Adaptive staff teaches "stand-up" lessons which include cognitive, visual impairment, hearing impairment, and other physical/medical disabilities which require a minimum of physical assists. Should a student have a disability which would require the use of sit-down equipment or a slider, we would refer them to The Three Trackers of Ohio, as they are the volunteer, non-profit, Adaptive program which is headquartered and located at our Brandywine Resort. We have schools which specialize in students with special needs that come to the area on a weekly basis. Instructors who have expertise in dealing with these needs are in charge as team leaders. They have instructors assigned to work with them who have been coached how to work with the needs of the students. The results are very positive and the instructor's experience is rewarding.

WHAT IS OUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE?

It's not the student we know about before the lesson arrives; it's the student with special needs that magically appears in our group lesson. We recognize that not everyone on our staff has the skills or training to be able to teach a student with special needs, especially when they arrive unexpectedly for their group lesson. However, our goal is to provide our instructors with enough information and training to recognize and assess the student's needs, quickly determine if a group setting is appropriate, know how to proceed with establishing the lesson goals, and teach a successful lesson. This training takes place primarily during our staff's fall training and continues throughout the season with on-hill staff training.

The typical mainstreamed student that we see in school ski clubs has some sort of a cognitive involvement. Their disabilities could be Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Developmental Disability (DD), Learning Disability (LD), but primarily they are students with Autism or

on the Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD).

We offer our instructors a brief overview of what ASD is, what to be aware of, and some brief teaching tips, this will usually provide them with enough information to create a successful lesson and regroup with the Hill Supervisor for next week. Our goal is not to make them an expert in dealing with Autism, but provide enough “tools” so they can teach that group lesson. Obviously, if the student with Autism has a behavioral problem and is disruptive to the class, the instructor will need to return his class to the meeting area and turn the student over to the Hill Supervisor and continue with his lesson.

Why should kids with special needs be involved in typical class settings? Everyone likes to be included. People are more alike than different. Exposing kids to group settings allows them to observe others, discuss concepts with students of the same level and participate in activities with their peers. An understanding is gained by all participants.

As an instructor, we need to find out the level of inclusion of the special needs student in their regular classroom, and try to parallel that scenario in the lesson. We should try to match the physical, endurance, motor abilities, and cognitive characteristics of the student with the group. We need to be age appropriate. Those students of lower levels of cognition should not be put into a class of younger people.

It is important that we understand the goals of the student and place them in a group with similar goals. Consider the amount of “hands-on” techniques required and place the student in an appropriate group size to accommodate that need. A helper might be needed, maybe an available instructor, or maybe a student aid from the school.

TEACHING/CLASS HANDLING TIPS

One of our Adaptive instructors (also a Special Education teacher) had a student with a hearing impairment in one of her school groups. The student’s mother told her that when giving instructions, look right at him and come up with a signal (i.e. thumbs-up) so that you know he “get’s it” without calling him out each time to make sure he heard you. So each time she would have the whole class give her thumbs up or down to tell if they understood what they were doing. Not a bad tip to put in your tool bag when teaching kids!

The same instructor had a student with Turret’s Syndrome and he had verbal tics and made noise the entire lesson. His school advisor said to make sure he stays with his buddies and give him an understanding instructor. Since he couldn’t help the tics, having his buddies in the group was helpful because they just ignored the tics and the lesson went on.

These are just a couple of examples of ways to make that lesson successful for all of your students, not just those with special needs. Take a look at your lesson handling tool bag. It could be time to empty them out and start to look at them as fun tools to develop ways to include everyone in your class so as not to single out an individual. Make everyone part

of the group:

- Try to match their skiing or riding skill level with others of similar abilities.
- Simplify your instructions.
- Use the “buddy” system.
- Keep your lessons/instructions age appropriate.
- Mix activities of high and low energy.
- Minimize distractions.
- Use less congested areas or areas near snow guns and lifts.

For teaching tips and tools for students with ASD, check out the “Autism Tool Kit” under the Adaptive header on the PSIA-AASI Central Division Educational Material web page (www.psia-c.org/educationalMaterial.php). Power Point presentations on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) are also available.

Above all, be safe and make the lesson FUN!

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