

Boot Scootin'

Understanding disabilities and fostering empathy

Lesson Objective/Goal:

This activity will help children understand what it might be like to have an ankle-foot disability or one-sided hemiplegia (muscle weakness on one half of the body).

A disability is a condition that limits a person's body movements or mind. For example, some children with Cerebral Palsy (CP) have difficulty with movements using their ankles, feet, and legs on one or both sides of the body.

For a better understanding of cerebral palsy or hemiplegia, you may want to refer to the glossary at the back of the book, "Calvin's Crazy Boots." This is a story about a young boy with cerebral palsy who wears ankle-foot orthotic braces.

You will need:

- *Snow boots for each child (preferably their own)
- *Outdoor space or gymnasium
- *One kickball or soccer ball per group.
- *Children's picture book, "Calvin's Crazy Boots" by Kim Pfeiffer (optional)
- *One set of bases and a kickball (optional)

Modifications: Instead of each child having a pair of boots, you could use a few pairs of boots and children could take turns demonstrating the exercises while the other children watch. Be sure children wear socks if sharing boots.

Set the stage:

- *What do you think it would be like if one of your legs and feet didn't move well?
- *What things could cause your legs and feet to NOT work the way your brain wants them to? (broken bone; playground injury; brain injury like stroke or cerebral palsy; etc.)

"When the body doesn't move how the brain tells it to move, it's called a **motor disability**. Today, you're going to learn about a disability called **hemiplegia**. This is a disability where the muscles on **one side** of the body are weak or too tight (cramped). Some children with hemiplegia need to wear braces on their ankles and feet. Wearing braces would feel a little bit like wearing snow boots all the time."

Activities:

- 1.) Read-aloud the picture book, “Calvin’s Crazy Boots.” Tell children, “Now you’re going to do some activities to help you understand how it might feel to wear AFO braces like Calvin. Some children wear braces on both feet, while others wear a brace on one foot only.
- 2.) Divide children into small teams, if desired. The activities can also be done as a whole class.
- 3.) Invite children to try various physical exercises while wearing regular tennis shoes on both feet: walk, run, skip, hop, kick a ball, jump rope, etc.
- 4.) Ask children to replace one shoe with a snow boot. Encourage them to put the snow boot on the foot they would use to kick a ball.
- 5.) Have children repeat the same exercises as above while wearing both snow boots.

Review and Discuss

Start by having a “reporter” from each group talk about what the group noticed.

Follow with class discussion:

- *What did you notice when you did the exercises wearing one boot? How was your balance? Speed? Coordination?
- *What did you notice when you did the exercises wearing two snow boots? How was it different than wearing only one boot? How was it different than wearing tennis shoes?
- *How do you think you would feel if you always had to wear ankle-foot orthotics or braces?
- *What things might be harder to do wearing braces?
- *How do you think it would feel to be different from other children because you have a disability?
- *How might you feel if you were going to a birthday party wearing AFOs? What might happen if it was a swimming party?
- *How do you think you could show kindness to a child who wears AFO braces? (invite them to play; wait patiently when they need extra time; treat them how you like to be treated, etc.)
- *How do you think you could show kindness to a child with any disability (wheelchair; walker; upper body; eyesight; hearing; learning/mental)?

Note: This is a teachable moment to discuss “disability etiquette.”

Extension activities:

- *If there’s a child in your classroom or school who wears AFOs, ask if they would be comfortable talking to the class and answering questions about them.
- *Play a class game of kickball. Take turns kicking the ball and running the bases wearing tennis shoes; one snow boot; two snow boots. Discuss how playing kickball is the same/different when playing in snow boots.

*Contact your local orthopedic and prosthetic practice. Ask if they would lend you an ankle-foot orthotic sample to show the class. Pass the orthotic around so the children can see/touch a real AFO. Perhaps an orthotic specialist would like to visit the classroom to talk about their work and how they help people.

*Watch a video about disability etiquette.

*Read aloud and discuss children's books about disabilities and kindness.