**Children with Special Needs and Soccer**

As the population of children with special needs continues to grow, soccer coaches and other volunteers who give of their time are finding themselves working with these children for the first time.

Here are some important tips you may want to use as you adapt your coaching to support children with special needs. Adapted from: 8 Important Tips For Working With a Special Needs Child by Karen Wang.

**1. Interact**

The biggest mistake that adults make when they meet a child with special needs is failing to interact with them. Usually they try asking a question but some children may not want to answer, then the adult gives up and starts talking to the parent. The same rules of polite conversation apply to adults and children.  First, introduce yourself and explain how you are going to be connected to the child. Then explain the activity that you will be doing with the child. Talk about the different steps of the activity, including the beginning and the end – while making as much eye contact as possible.

**2. Observe**

Some children with special needs perceive sensory input in different ways and may be unable to verbalize discomfort. Remember that all behavior is communication. Always keep a lookout for these differences and think about what the child’s behavior is communicating to you. If you’re not sure what you’re seeing, ask the child’s parents for advice.

**3. Use Common Sense**

Put safety first and arrange the environment for physical and emotional comfort. Take the time to explain the game simply to the child. One step at a time. For example, the first practice may consist of passing the ball to one other player. That may be all for that day. Also, when practicing one skill at a time, make sure that the child is around the middle of the line so that they have many examples to watch before it is their turn. They will become more confident watching the other players and will not be too far back in the line where they would lose focus.

**4. Be Flexible**

Some adults say that they will not change the way they do things to accommodate one person in a group. But the whole point of teaching is to use a variety of methods to help the players understand and master new skills. For example, if a child refuses to let go of a parent, bring the parent into the activity for a few minutes to reduce anxiety, then fade out the parent. If a child does not have the appropriate motor skills for an activity, help the child go through the motions and assign a buddy to help the child practice on the sidelines for a few minutes.

**5. Be Consistent**

If a set of rules is presented to the group, apply those rules consistently to everyone.  Most students with special needs flourish in an environment which promotes consistency.

**6. Use Visual, Auditory or Tactile Cues**

Having the right cues in an environment can mean the difference between participation and non-participation for many children with special needs.

**7. Have a Plan and a Back-Up Plan**

You know what they say about the best-laid plans. In the world of special needs, there is always a Plan B, and usually a Plan C. Make sure that there is space to calm down and move freely if things go badly. Think about what each participant can do instead of focusing on what they can’t contribute.

**8. Be Positive**

A positive attitude is the single most important quality for anyone who works with children with special needs. There have been highly-trained specialists unable to interact with some students with special needs because of their negative attitude and assumptions.

<http://osadev.cansportlive2.com/Portals/438/clubdevelopment/Soccer%20for%20Players%20with%20a%20Disability%20Manual.pdf>