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# Fun Hour

## A social program for kids with disabilities

*This YMCA program in Pennsylvania focuses on social interaction and peer relationships*

Tom Reinke

When Mary Beth was little my wife Mary and I made the Saturday rounds with her to Special Olympics soccer and Challenger softball, and it was nice to be outside in the sun doing things with other families. But as Mary Beth moved into her teen years we felt the need to move on. Sports are great for all kids but we felt it was important for Mary Beth to try more social activities that would help her develop closer relationships with her peers.

What I had in mind was a program with an informal atmosphere that would encompass different activities and support relationship-building social interaction. However, particularly for Mary Beth who has more significant physical and intellectual disabilities, I knew such a program would need some structure and adult leadership.

For several months I searched for an existing program that fit my mental picture but all I came up with were dances or other intermittent social events. I did not find any programs that focused on social interaction so I set out to start my own. With just a little effort I found support for my ideas at the Community YMCA of Eastern Delaware County and my local Arc, the Arc of Delaware County

(DELARC). The YMCA was actively looking to do something for kids with disabilities and agreed to provide its facilities. DELARC volunteered to coordinate the enrollment activities.

With these arrangements in place, the Fun Hour program started in March 2006 on Friday nights at 6:30 pm with 20 kids and their families. Our recruitment flyer billed the Fun Hour as a time for kids to have fun while parents chatted and networked on the sidelines.

### Here's what has worked

The Fun Hour has celebrated its first anniversary and the kids that have been in the program for a while have come together. As a group they know each other's individual personalities and they interact spontaneously. On an individual level many of the kids have revealed different sides of their personalities - we have a clown who turns different activities into slapstick fun and we have a couple of girls who are natural group leaders.

Our list of activities has grown over time through trial and error; we try something and if the kids like it we stick with it. This grass roots approach has allowed the program to fit the characteristics and abilities of the group - Mary Beth will now say to me, "Y tonight, Daddy?" and then on the way home she will volunteer, "Wow, that was fun!"

Here are some of the techniques and specific activities that have worked in the Fun Hour.

### Creating a cohesive group.

We use group activities to promote interaction among all of the kids. Many activities are done in circles with the kids sitting as close together as possible. For example,

each evening begins with the same gathering activity - as the kids arrive they join a circle and toss a ball around. As they toss the ball they call out the name of the person they are throwing to. Naming the other person creates direct eye contact and reinforces one of our most important goals - peer interactions.

An activity that promotes interaction among different kids is "Shoes in the middle," a game where the kids sit in a circle with their legs stretched toward the center. Each child places one of their shoes in the middle and then they take turns picking a shoe and finding the person with its match.

When a new person joins the group, we will also sit in a circle, introduce ourselves and chat about simple things.

### Putting each kid in the spotlight.

The Fun Hour uses leadership principles to help the kids get to know each other and build their self confidence.

Every evening starts with simple exercises - sit ups, push ups, touch your toes - and each exercise is led by a different child. I ask for volunteers and then bring the kids up front one by one. They face the group, pick an exercise and set the number of repetitions to be done. They also lead the counting of the reps; the louder the better. Even the non-verbal kids lead exercises; I may name the exercise to the group but I ask the child demonstrate the exercise and show how many reps they want the group to do.

Another strategy we use to encourage self-expression is jokes and charades. The kids especially enjoy telling knock-knock and other simple jokes. Again, they come up front, stand before the group and tell their joke. For charades,



instead of acting out book or movie titles the kids use simple things: daily activities such as brushing your teeth and raking leaves, or sports activities such as shooting baskets or playing golf. By its nature, charades is another great activity for non-verbal kids.

### **Activities that work**

During the early days of the program I looked around for game and activity books that would help me get started. One of the best books ones I found is *Creative Play Activities for Children with Disabilities*, written by Lisa Rappaport Morris and Linda Schulz. This book has a wide range of activities that fit a variety of situations.

But none of the materials quite met our needs because, as a rule, the activities were too structured or required too many props. Instead, I sought input from parents and we began experimenting with the activities that come naturally to all kids.

**Music.** Music is sure fire catalyst for fun and interaction. The Fun Hour kids love singing and dancing to the Village People's "YMCA". They also like "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" with each child leading a different verse.

**Dancing.** Group and line dances combine physical activity with music. The "Hokey Pokey" works as do simple line dances with four steps forward and four steps back, or three steps forward and kick, then three steps back and feet together.

**Jokes.** Once the kids start telling their favorite jokes, they don't want to stop, even if some of them are repeated. Kids jokes books are a great resource to keep this activity fresh.

**Charades.** I have developed a charades cheat sheet that lists daily

activities, sports activities, animals (elephant or crocodile) and adult roles (police man or teacher) the kids can act out. If the kids don't have ideas of their own, I suggest something from the list. Once kids have mastered simple charades they do individually, they can move on to two-person charades like two people playing tennis or, baseball with a pitcher and batter.

**Skits.** The kids have just started to work with skits. There is an infinite variety of skits so they can work for all kids, youngsters, non-verbal and shy kids. The skits can be silent portrayals of simple everyday activities or they may use dialog and role playing. Skits are an important item in Cub Scouts and some great skit books can be found on the scouting web sites.

**Magic.** Magic tricks are another new activity for the group. We will start with the simplest tricks and try to match them to the kids' individual abilities. I have found a couple of books and kits that can be adapted to the group.

**Physical Activities.** The Fun Hour meets in a large multipurpose room which has a fairly high ceiling but it is not a gym and our activities are somewhat limited. Activities that have worked for Fun Hour include:

- Balloon volleyball – A balloon simplifies this game. It can be played indoors and by small children or those physical disabilities.

- Duck-duck-goose – This game promotes one on one interaction between kids when they select another child to be "it."

- Parachute games – Parachute games promote group cooperation. There are many games that can be played with parachutes from launching balloons or foam

balls to racing underneath a parachute waving up and down.

I try to balance the pace of the evening and maintain an even tone by alternating a physical activity with a social or interactive activity. For example, after our opening exercises which are fairly vigorous I may slow the pace with 10 or 15 minutes of jokes.

### **Cooperative Play**

While a primary focus of Fun Hour is letting the kids be kids, some parents asked for activities that emphasized cooperative play. At first, I wasn't sure I understood what this meant so I scurried around to educate myself. I learned that cooperative play means different things to different people and that it has several levels of sophistication. Most simply it is parallel play with limited interaction. At a higher level it is taking turns in a game and at the highest level it is children working together in a group situation to accomplish a goal or solve a problem.

I tried several activities before I came up with one that worked. Our first successful activity was a task situation where the kids were paired up and each was given a handful of dominoes. Their assignment was to take turns laying down the dominos, end to end, in a straight line. This activity encouraged taking turns and cooperation in making a straight line. After this we moved on to making different shapes such as an "L" and a square.

Cooperative play has fit in very nicely and will continue to play a role in the Fun Hour. In the future we will focus on more complex problems and on group problem solving.

**Fits a niche**

The Fun Hour fits a specific need and niche. It is most appropriate for ambulatory kids and those with mild to moderate developmental disabilities. The children in the program commonly have mild Down syndrome or cerebral palsy. The program also has had children with mild Asperger's Syndrome. It has not been a good fit for children with certain autistic disorders who have difficulty with transitions from one activity to another.

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