



SAFETY DIRECTOR BULLETIN



SPECIAL NEEDS CLASSROOM BEST PRACTICES

Working with special education students is rewarding and can have a life-long impact on students. However, there are hazards in the classroom. Here are some strategies for providing a safe, constructive learning environment.

Develop a Plan

Behavior support plans (BSP) help students build positive behaviors while eliminating or reducing disruptive or aggressive behaviors. Teachers, aides, and other learning professionals should be involved in developing the plan. A behavioral support plan can prevent workplace injuries by:

- Ensuring all staff are familiar with the plan.
- Confirming that all staff follow the plan.
- Reporting potential plan changes when needed.
- Keeping the plan up to date.
- Including triggers that may lead to behavior changes, such as a fire drill or substitutes.
- Noting specific ways to create and support positive behaviors.

Provide Training

Special education staff should be trained in dealing with the student's disability, de-escalation procedures, and managing challenging behaviors. The JIF offers three online training courses geared towards special education staff:

- Special Education Support Staff: Safety and Injury Prevention
- Special Education: Lifts and Transfers
- Special Education: Safety in the Classroom

Investigate and Identify Causes of Employee Injuries

When workplace injuries occur, it is important to identify where they are happening. An incident investigation can assist with determining causes and corrective action. Here are the steps to take to begin the process:

- Document all employee injuries on an Employee Injury Report form.
- Inform the injured employee's supervisor and administrator of all injuries.
- The supervisor should investigate the injury to determine the causes.
- Seek recommendations for improvement from staff.
- When a pattern (more than two from the same student) of aggressive or inappropriate behaviors causes employee injuries, the supervisor or administrator needs to take corrective action. This often involves convening an Individualized Education Program (IEP) team meeting.

Dress Safely

What to Wear:

- Use clip-on identification tags or break-away lanyards.
- Long sleeves and long pants whenever possible to protect yourself from bites or scratches.
- Bite guards, shin guards, or padded jackets, when indicated in a student's BSP.

What to Avoid Wearing:

- Loose or baggy clothing that you can easily slip out of if it is grabbed or pulled.
- Necklaces and ties.
- Rings, especially with protruding stones. Turn stones inward to avoid scratching or getting caught.
- Dangling or hoop earrings.
- Consider eliminating all earrings, even studs, as they can cause injuries if pulled.

Preventing Lifting Injuries and Slips/Falls

Staff working in Special Education classrooms must have a positive mental attitude and a clear understanding of their physical abilities and limitations. Back injuries can occur when lifting or moving students. To prevent these types of injuries, staff should consider stretching before starting work and throughout the day.

On a regular workday, you may bend and twist your body many times. Those single movements add up and may lead to injury. Limit forward bending as much as possible. Alternatives include squatting down to the level of the student, putting one knee on the floor, or sitting in a small chair at eye level with the student. Plan every lift, go slowly, and always have a partner available to assist. Never perform a lift or transfer without proper training.

Other strategies to prevent lifting injuries include:

- Evaluate lifting or transfer methods and determine if there are safer ways to accomplish the task.
- Train staff in proper lifting techniques.
- Modify transfer surfaces, such as raising/lowering, changing tables.
- Obtain additional equipment to assist with lifting.
- Obtain additional staff to assist with lifting or modify schedules so additional staff are available during times when lifting is needed.
- Modify or rearrange the student's physical school environment.

Other Considerations

Good Communication: Set aside time for teachers and assistants to share student observations and plan the next steps. Also, provide a way for staff to communicate and get assistance in a crisis, such as a two-way radio.

Projectiles: Limit access to items that students could throw. Evaluate learning tools and consider substituting safer items.

Bloodborne Pathogen Exposure: Know your organization's Exposure Control Plan and report any exposure immediately.

Housekeeping: Good housekeeping is everyone's responsibility and can reduce slips, trips, and falls. Pick up any dropped items immediately. Keep school supplies organized and safely stored on shelves. Avoid clutter.

Healthy Classrooms: To avoid spreading germs, wash hands throughout the day and always before eating. Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue or your elbow when sneezing and coughing; teach and encourage students to do the same.

Additional Resources: There are numerous resources available to help us stay informed and up-to-date on best practices. The [New Jersey Department of Education Office of Special Education](#) offers a wealth of information, including training materials, policy guidelines, and contact information for further assistance.

Organizations such as the [Crisis Prevention Institute \(CPI\)](#) and the [National Association of School Psychologists \(NASP\)](#) also provide valuable resources and training opportunities.