

## UNIT D

# TRANSPORTATION OF EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS

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# **UNIT D**

## **TRANSPORTATION OF EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Local school districts are responsible for providing special education programs and services for the exceptional students within their district. The school district or intermediate unit must identify, locate, and evaluate all exceptional students within its boundaries and place them into programs that are planned uniquely for them. Whenever appropriate, these students are included in the regular school environment, which includes ordinary transportation to and from school. Where this is not possible, however, special transportation is provided, often involving different types of vehicles and procedures. With this specialized transportation service, these students can receive the education, therapy, and other opportunities that they need.

Mainstreaming of exceptional students is increasing in the transportation of students. You must have a working knowledge of:

- (1) guidelines for managing exceptional students while they are being transported, and
- (2) special transportation procedures used for these students.

This unit provided information on both of these topics. The position you hold as driver of these students may be one of the most demanding and difficult jobs you will ever have, but it also may be one of the most rewarding.

### **DRIVER RESPONSIBILITY**

Local policy is the guideline for your role and responsibility as a driver of exceptional students. To ensure smooth pick-up and return of students, keep in mind that:

- Stops will be established by the Intermediate Unit staff or school district in cooperation with the bus contractor. Changes in stops must be approved by the Transportation Department.
- The student's home may be assigned as the pickup and return location. If so, you may wish to introduce yourself to each student's parent(s) by telephone or personal visit, and tell them approximately what time you will pick up the student each morning and approximately when you will deliver the student home in the afternoon.
- Remind parents to have the student ready for morning pickup at least 5 minutes before your expected arrival. If the student is continually late for pickup, notify your supervisor. (Keep written notes of dates.)
- A responsible adult should be home to receive the student in the afternoon.

To ensure students' safety in case of a crash:

- Keep a written description of your route, pupils' addresses, and their telephone numbers in a safe place.
- If you assign permanent seats in your bus, keep one copy of the seating arrangement in the bus and turn one copy in to the office.

## CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION

By law, the information identifying exceptional students is confidential—it is your duty to keep the information confidential.

You will have to talk occasionally to parents and teachers about transporting a student. Apart from these practical conversations, do not discuss anything concerning students, parents, teachers, classes, or vehicles with parents or neighbors. If anyone raises a question, refer them to the proper source, i.e., teacher, principal, or supervisor. Never hold any discussions in front of the students.

Secure medical and emergency information for each student. Record any medications used by the student, when they should be administered, and any possible side effects. Note any unique behavior patterns to watch for and procedures for managing any circumstances that might arise while the student is under your supervision.

## GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS

To manage exceptional students while transporting them, you must know their specific behavior patterns and required treatments. All students are affected by other people's actions, particularly people who play significant roles in their lives, but exceptional students may be especially sensitive to the behavior and moods of others.

Parents, teachers, and special education professionals can give you information about the nature and extent of a student's handicap along with other relevant information.

In addition to following the previous guidelines for managing students, keep these points in mind about dealing with exceptional students.

- Be observant and try to anticipate problems. Always expect the unexpected.
- Keep teachers, professionals, and parents informed of problems with the student or significant change in behavior.
- In dealing with the teachable mentally retarded, insist that they make their needs known to you by speaking or pointing.
- Give socially and emotionally disturbed students some responsibility in setting the standards of behavior they must meet.
- If an emotionally disturbed student becomes agitated or loses self-control, you should verbally intervene and attempt to calm the situation.
- Be aware that "bad days" happen. The student's efficiency and self control may vary from day to day or from week to week. These puzzling shifts may lead you to feel that much of the student's behavior is willful disobedience. Remember, these fluctuations may not be under the student's control.
- Always put safety first. If a student's behavior is distracting or dangerous to others, report the situation to your supervisor immediately.
- Introduce a substitute driver to the students in advance if possible, since a change in routine may cause some students to react emotionally. Make sure the new driver has explicit, written instructions about the route and pick-up and drop-off times for each student.

**“START”: A MEMORY AID FOR MANAGING EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS**

You will likely carry at least one exceptional student on your bus during your driving career. Because you may not even know that you are transporting an exceptional student, everyone should be aware of the special concerns relating to exceptional students. An easy way to remember these special concerns is with the word “START.”

**S = Special.** ..... Every exceptional student is unique. You should get to know each one and learn of their individual traits. Talk with the student, their parents, and teachers to find out important information. Students, even those with the same condition, are different. The more you know about their needs the better you can accommodate them. Be aware that some information is confidential.

**T = Treat Equally.** ..... Try to treat all students the same, regardless of whether or not they are exceptional. Exceptional students want to be treated the same as all other students. Although there are many differences, whenever possible, all students should be required to follow the same rules. No one should be given special treatment or privileges.

**A = Attention** ..... You must pay attention to exceptional students. Some students will behave poorly in order to get your attention. By paying attention to them, you may improve their behavior. They may require more of your time than other students.

**R = Restraints** ..... Students with physical disabilities often require special seats or restraining devices. Learn to properly secure these students in their seats. Those who use wheelchairs need proper tiedowns.

**T = Different Techniques** ..... A particular method may not work in all situations with all students. If you are having trouble maintaining control of a student, change your method and try something new. Keep trying until you find something that works. The old saying “try, try, try again” is particularly appropriate when it comes to handling exceptional students. Be sure to ask other drivers or your supervisor for helpful suggestions in handling particular students or situations.

**TYPES OF EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS**

In addition to the general guidelines above, you should understand the different types of exceptional students you may be transporting and the specific procedures to use in managing each type.

**PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED (PH)**

Physically handicapped students have orthopedic health problems caused by injury or disease. Some severely handicapped students may require wheelchairs or other holding devices. Moderately handicapped students can walk with crutches or a walker. They may need help in boarding. Whenever possible, some slightly handicapped students are integrated into the regular transportation system. These students sometimes avoid trying to do things for themselves. Encourage them to become as independent as their condition will permit.

Some common physical disorders and their effects include:

- Cerebral Palsy—causes abnormal changes in physical movement, sometimes including other problems such as seizures.
- Spastic Paralysis—results in slow, explosive, or poorly coordinated movements.
- Ataxia—causes unsteadiness, falling, and erratic movement of the eyes.
- Athetosis—causes frowns and other facial grimaces, uncontrolled movements, lurching, and writhing. Problems increase when the student becomes self-conscious and tries to control movements.
- Tremor—cause an involuntary shaking of the arms, legs, or trunk.
- Muscular Dystrophy—a progressive general weakening or wasting away of various muscle groups in the body. Children may wear braces at first and use a wheelchair as the disease progresses.
- Spina Bifida—a birth defect involving the spinal cord. Depending upon the severity of the defect, the student may be partially paralyzed, deformed, or mentally retarded.
- Poliomyelitis—a viral infection in the spinal cord that weakens muscles. The student may use crutches or a wheelchair. This disorder does not affect intelligence.

Some students may have multiple handicaps, including other disorders described in this unit.

### **VISUALLY IMPAIRED (VIP)**

Students who are visually impaired are either blind or partially sighted. Their educational development may not be very different from that of seeing students, but they may have trouble adjusting. Totally blind students usually do not have problems speaking, hearing, or understanding, but they may be behind other students of the same age in some school subjects. This may cause them to feel embarrassment with their classmates. Learning to move around, find objects and places, and orient themselves to new situations helps them develop poise and independence. So be sure to allow them to move independently, while watching out for their safety.

### **SPEECH IMPAIRED (SI)**

Speech impaired students may attend special classes even though their problem may not involve any intellectual retardation. Speech difficulty, however, may be combined with other types of handicaps.

### **HEARING IMPAIRED (HI)**

Hearing impaired students often require special transportation. Hard-of-hearing students are those with slight to moderate hearing loss; their sense of hearing is still functional, though they may use a hearing aid. Deaf students must be taught through their other senses. Their greatest difficulty is to learn speech and language. To communicate, the student learns to respond to lip movement, facial expression, signs, and/or finger spelling. Ask the teacher or parent to explain the nature and extent of the student's hearing loss and the best way to communicate with him or her.

The hearing impaired student must board and leave the vehicle at the curb. Never allow the student to cross any streets without adult supervision, since the student may be unable to hear oncoming traffic or warning signals.

## LEARNING DISABLED (LD)

Students who are learning disabled have a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using spoken or written language. The disorder may show up as trouble with listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, or solving math problems. This category does not include students with learning disorders caused by visual, hearing, or motor handicaps or mental, emotional, or environmental disorders. The learning disabled often have average or above average intellectual ability.

Learning disabled students do not all behave alike. However, the following behaviors are common:

- Poor planning and a general disorganization. Their ability to solve problems, follow instructions, and learn changes from moment to moment and day to day.
- Extreme emotional reactions. In frustrating situations, the student may “go to pieces” more than the situation deserves.
- Overactivity. The student may be unable to sit still or stick to one task for very long before looking for something else to do.
- Impulsiveness. The student often exhibits uncontrolled, abrupt, and sudden changes in behavior, which seem impulsive. These students often act without considering the consequences and may endanger or harm themselves or others.

Students behaving in these ways may seem to be deliberately disobedient or stubborn when, in fact, they can't control their behavior. Your main goal in disciplining these students should be to help the student control his emotions. While this is what you might expect of all students, it is harder for the learning-disabled student to achieve this goal.

## MENTALLY RETARDED

These students have impaired mental development, which seriously reduces their ability to learn. The category includes students who have significant difficulties with learning, motivation, or social adjustment as a result of less-than-average intellectual functioning. Students within this category may be mildly mentally retarded and relatively self-sufficient or they may be severely mentally retarded and totally dependent.

## AUTISTIC STUDENTS

Childhood autism is a disorder that usually begins before the age of 2 1/2 years. An autistic student may display some of these characteristics:

- Indifference to other people. Autistic students sometimes treat other people as if they were objects and just in the way. They may bump into you as if you were a piece of furniture, without excusing themselves or noticing that they bumped into another person.
- Difficulty looking people in the eye. When you talk to autistic students, you often have to work hard to get and keep their attention, especially if they are not facing you. Autistic students may not notice or pay attention to other students or adults.
- Problems with their speech and language. Some autistic students cannot speak at all. Others may just scream or make other noises. Sometimes if they can speak, speech is unusual. They tend to repeat whatever you say instead of answering you. They may use language that you can't understand or that is confusing, such as reversing the use of the words “you” and “I.”
- Unusual reactions to different parts of their environment. They are very resistant to any change. They are easily upset and anxious about changes other students may not even notice, such as if a different type of bus picks them up; if they are in the window seat instead of the aisle seat; if they are sitting next to someone they don't usually sit next to. They are often very sensitive to changes in temperature, loud noises, or physical touch and have a panic reaction at times to some of these changes.

- Unusual interest in objects. They may cling to objects, and examine and reexamine them. They are also fascinated by various kinds of movements, becoming completely absorbed by a spinning wheel or fan.
- Problems with their own movement. They may repeat movements over and over again without any particular purpose, for example, swaying, rocking, or flapping their hands.

When dealing with autistic students, remember that these students are affected by a disorder; their conduct is not necessarily willful. They cannot always control or stop their behavior when you ask them to. These students need sameness, calmness, structure, and firmness along with gentleness, and patience.

### **SERIOUS EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCE (SED)**

Students who are emotionally disturbed act in ways that are inappropriate, either in their nature or in their timing or degree. They have unusual difficulties maintaining interpersonal relationships; can be aggressive, withdrawn, anxious, or easily frustrated; and often have low self confidence. These students may be unable to express feelings and needs without creating problems for themselves and others. Autistic students and those with learning adjustment problems and behavior disorders are included in this group.

### **OTHER HEALTH IMPAIRED (OHI)**

This group includes students who are chronically ill and students who are temporarily disabled and require special transportation. For example, these students may be hemophiliacs, heart patients, or post-operative patients. Talk to parents or teachers to find out about the special needs of these students on your route. Some students may wear medical identification tags that specify care and medical limitations.

### **GIFTED OR TALENTED STUDENTS**

These students meet the ability criteria for special programs. They may require special transportation if these programs are not provided by the local educational agency.

### **NEUROLOGICALLY IMPAIRED (NI) (BRAIN DAMAGED)**

Students who have incurred a moderate to severe injury to the brain as identified by a neurological examination, resulting in severe behavior and learning disorders.

### **EPILEPTIC STUDENTS**

Epilepsy is a chronic nervous disorder, characterized by seizures. You should know what to do if a student has a seizure during the bus ride. Follow these steps to minimize any injuries to the student:

- Keep calm. The student is usually not suffering or in danger.
- Help the child to a safe place, but do not restrain his or her movements. Move away anything the student may strike against with his or her head, arms, or legs. Most injuries occur from bumping hard objects.
- Loosen tight clothing and turn the student on his or her side.
- Do not force a hard object between the student's teeth.
- Do not give the student anything to drink.
- Saliva may flow from the student's mouth. Wipe it away with a tissue.
- Stand by until the student has fully recovered consciousness and seems clearheaded.

The student may seem dazed and incoherent for awhile after a seizure.

- Encourage deep breathing after the student regains consciousness.
- Assure the student that all is well and encourage him or her to go about regular activities. Occasionally after a seizure the student may want to sleep. Help him or her to a safe place to rest.

## TRANSPORTING EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS

Transporting exceptional students involves special equipment and procedures in addition to basic bus driving skills. This section describes bus stop procedures, the modified vehicles and special equipment used in transporting exceptional students, and emergency procedures and evacuation drills.

### BUS STOP PROCEDURES

#### Identifying Bus Stops

- The bus stop for exceptional students may be located on the sidewalk or driveway in front of their homes.
- The bus stop should have level parking, smooth approaches from the house, and adequate space for placing ramps and loading wheelchairs.
- Bus stops in which you must pull the vehicle over to the left side of the street, facing oncoming traffic, are prohibited.
- Each stop requires its own approach. Adapt procedures for the particular needs of the student and the location.
- Stops for exceptional students require more time and care than those for average students. Find a place where traffic will not be unduly held up if the school bus eight-way light system is activated.

#### Loading Procedures

- Following the procedures outlined in the unit on loading and unloading for pulling up to the bus stop.
- If you can pull the vehicle completely off the road surface, you don't need to use the school bus eight-way light system. However, you must use the hazard warning lights.
- Sometimes students will need your help boarding or carrying their belongings. Assisting in the loading of a physically handicapped or nonambulatory student is a time when you are permitted to leave the wheel of your vehicle. If you must leave the wheel, put the transmission in park or neutral and turn off the ignition. **Be sure to remove the keys and set the emergency brake.** On some vehicles with special equipment such as a lift, you must leave the engine on during loading and unloading. In these situations, make sure the transmission is in park or neutral and the emergency brake is engaged before you leave the vehicle for loading or unloading.
- In order to board or leave the bus, the severely handicapped student may need the help of several people (e.g., parents, attendants) in addition to yourself. Be sure that all persons involved know their role in this procedure, ideally before the beginning of the school year.
- Most vehicles have seat belts that you must help students secure. Before turning on the engine again, make sure that all seat belts are fastened, all doors and windows are locked, all security devices are engaged, and all belongings are securely placed. Keep messages and supplies for delivery to parents or teachers in a secure place.

- Plan considerably more time to load exceptional students. Allow a 3-minute wait for a student to appear, plus a 3- to 5-minute (or sometimes longer) loading time.
- Remember—if a student requires an escort, you must never leave him or her unattended.

### Assigning Seats

- If your exceptional student is mainstreamed on a large bus with many other regular education students, don't automatically assign the student to the front seat. Typically, front seats are saved for problem students, and not many students want to sit near the driver. Exceptional students are like most of your student passengers—they would prefer to sit in the rear of the bus with their friends.
- When assigning a seat to your exceptional student consider such factors as mobility and independence of the student, ease of emergency evacuation, availability of dependable assistance, and vulnerability of the exceptional student to interaction of other students.

### On the Road

- While on the road after loading or before unloading your passengers, watch for any behaviors that might cause a dangerous situation. If attendants are available, assign them to make sure that all students remain safely seated and secure. With or without attendants, make periodic checks yourself. Knowing each student's specific behavior patterns will enable you to avoid potentially dangerous situations while transporting these students.

### Unloading Procedures

- Unloading procedures are similar to loading, but in the reverse order.
- Never leave students outside or inside their homes unless a parent or other responsible person is there. Since policies differ from area to area, local school district officials must establish specific procedures to follow when no responsible person is present where the student is to be unloaded.

## MODIFIED VEHICLES AND SPECIAL EQUIPMENT

Depending on the needs of exceptional students in each school district, various modifications can be made to vehicles and special equipment can be obtained. You will be given additional training by the local school district or intermediate unit in the operation of modified vehicles and special equipment that you will need to use.

### Modified Vehicles

Because exceptional students have a wide variety of needs, there is also a wide range of vehicles to transport them. Such vehicles include personal autos, taxis, 10-passenger cars and vans, 12-passenger minibuses, and 66-passenger and larger school buses. Modified vehicles must conform to standards set by the Pupil Transportation Section, PennDOT. Exceptions to these standards must receive prior approval from PennDOT.

### Special Equipment

State law (Title 75, Section 4581) requires that children that are under four years of age and transported in a school vehicle must be fastened securely in a child safety seat. The law also requires that children four years of age or older, but under eight years of age, must be fastened in a seat belt and in a child booster seat. Any children transported that are over the age of eight, but less than 18 years of age, must be fastened in a seat belt.

Other special equipment you may have to use includes manual ramps and automatic lifts for wheelchairs, seat belts, positioning belts or harnesses, and stretchers. Exceptional students are often in wheelchairs, and a general description of the automatic lifts and manual ramps used to load and unload them is presented below. The specific procedures for using all special equipment will be provided as a part of your local training.

*Manual Ramps for Bus or Van.* Some vehicles carry ramps to allow attendants to manually roll wheelchairs into a van or bus or to allow students who can walk to enter without climbing deep steps. A combination ramp and shallow step is also available. You may have to pin the ramp into place on the vehicle. You may also use special techniques to push the wheelchair and the passenger up the ramp and to lower them down without straining yourself (or the attendant) and without endangering the security of the student.

*Automatic Lifts.* Buses and other vehicles designed or converted to carry passengers in wheelchairs are often equipped with an automatic wheelchair lift. In these cases, guide the wheelchair onto the lift platform and lock the wheelchair's brake. After you secure the rider, raise the platform to bus floor level by activating a special control switch. Once the wheelchair is inside, always position and secure it to the floor with a wheelchair restraining device and secure the student independently of the wheelchair. Check with your supervisor for the correct method of tiedowns.

## EMERGENCY PROCEDURES AND EVACUATION DRILLS

The procedures to follow in case of an accident or any serious condition that forces you to stop and seek assistance are generally the same as those outlined in Unit H (Accident and Emergency Procedures) and Unit I (Student Emergencies). Carry a copy of first aid procedures in the vehicle. Make sure your vehicle has the required and optional emergency equipment listed and described in Unit H. In addition to this equipment, a door-holding device is recommended because you will have to help students unload in an evacuation.

When planning emergency procedures, keep these points in mind:

- Under no circumstances should you leave the students being transported.
- An orthopedically handicapped student can sometimes serve as a second-in-command in emergency situations if an aide is not available. Consult with the parents and teachers in advance about the abilities of particular students to decide whether this would work.
- Assign blind and deaf students to a partner who can assist them in case of an emergency.
- Because many exceptional students have trouble remembering, evacuation drills for them should be limited to simulations at the school, where school supervisory personnel can assist in performing the drill and help train those students capable of taking responsibility. Bus evacuation procedures and drills are described in Unit H.
- Exceptional students who can walk are evacuated in the same manner as non-exceptional students, whenever possible.
- In a crisis, students who can't walk may be placed on the floor and pulled by their clothing out of any available door. Ramps may be used to roll or slide them to the ground.
- Exceptional students who have been involved in a crash or an emergency evacuation should be examined by the school nurse even if they appear uninjured. On the homeward trip, inform the parent or guardian of the incident.

## **REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. *What is your role as a driver of exceptional students?*
2. *With whom can you discuss information about an exceptional student?*
3. *In addition to following the guidelines presented in previous units, what guidelines are specific to managing exceptional students?*
4. *Describe what you may need to do to assist physically handicapped students.*
5. *What behavior patterns are common to students with learning disabilities?*
6. *What procedures should you follow if a student has a seizure?*
7. *In addition to loading procedures discussed in unit C, what procedures do you need to follow when loading an exceptional student?*
8. *How can you evacuate the exceptional students from your bus?*
9. *Explain the memory aid "START."*
10. *What is the single most important consideration in transporting exceptional students?*