

Therapeutic Recreation Specialist

Making

A

DIFFERENCE in the **lives**
of **students** with
special needs

Christopher, a fourth grader who has learning disabilities, is having difficulty understanding fractions during his math lessons. Amy, a kindergartner with cerebral palsy, is in her wheelchair most of the day. She has full use of her torso and arms and wants to play physical games with other children but doesn't know how. Eduardo, a young teenager, was born prematurely and is small for his age. He has a hearing loss and does not socialize well with classmates but has outstanding fine motor skills.



C A R E E R S

**in Special
Education
and Related Services**



All of these students can benefit from the services of a school therapeutic recreation specialist/therapeutic specialist. Therapeutic recreation specialists plan, direct, and supervise recreation programs that meet the needs of each student. To see how fractions look and feel, Christopher might enjoy breaking large cookies into halves and quarters or pouring water into measuring cups. Amy would probably enjoy bowling with a lightweight plastic ball. Her therapeutic recreation specialist would know what size ball and pins to provide and whether Amy needs a ramp for the ball. Eduardo can expand his social skills by learning to play a variety of games such as checkers, dominoes, or gin rummy—none requires much talking or listening. The therapeutic recreation specialist could also introduce Eduardo to a hobby like origami (Japanese paper folding). The beautiful and unusual objects he could make would boost Eduardo's confidence.

Therapeutic recreation specialists use sports, games, arts and crafts, music, dance, drama, sightseeing excursions and non-traditional recreation activities to improve or maintain the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of students who receive special education services. Therapeutic recreation specialists have special training and earned credentials that assist children with disabilities to benefit from education and improve their quality of life, increase independent function, and thus improve their quality of life.

Nature of Work

Understanding the nature and impact of a student's disability is the first requirement for therapeutic recreation specialists in schools. They retrieve pertinent information through their own observation and from school medical records, classroom teachers, special education teachers, parents, and the students themselves. Therapeutic recreation specialists know, for example, that some children with disabilities may not have the skills to understand or maintain participation in certain games

"**Some children can roll dice** but then have to individually count each dot which extends the length of the game," commented a therapeutic recreation specialist. "I keep that in mind when I'm planning games." This specialist also knows the level of patience each child has and groups students accordingly when she plans games. "One day a few youngsters refused to finish a card game, claiming they weren't winning," remembered another therapeutic recreation specialist. Using a local football team as an illustration, the therapeutic recreation specialist asked the students if they would like to see the players walk off the field in the middle of the game—if the home team was behind in scoring. The children all agreed that was not the right thing to do, and resumed the card game.

Therapeutic recreation specialists consult regularly with classroom teachers and other health and special education professionals. An art teacher, for example, might suggest the best size of paintbrushes and paint containers to use for students who have limited fine motor control. An occupational therapist might be willing to visit a cooking session and help the children use various utensils safely. Sometimes a city recreation program will collaborate with the school system in providing or sharing equipment and other resources.

Although students do not receive grades in recreation therapy classes, their progress is recorded in writing. In addition to preparing program plans, therapeutic recreation specialists describe the student's reaction before, during, and after an activity. The written records are valuable for long term activity and budget planning.

Therapeutic recreation specialists generally have some responsibility for acquiring, maintaining, and storing the materials they use in schools. And for budget purposes, they also need to know approximate costs of items. If a school system has a technology specialist on staff, that person can provide valuable suggestions to therapeutic recreation specialists

about specific devices and equipment for students with disabilities.

Because some students with disabilities have limitations in what they can do during the non-school leisure hours, recreation therapy is a wonderful opportunity for them to discover new talents. With the help of a therapeutic recreation specialist, a child in a wheelchair plays catch for the first time with a foam ball. Now she can do something fun with classmates and her family. She doesn't realize it, but the therapeutic recreation specialist knows that this girl is also exercising her muscles, tracking the path of the ball with her eyes, following instructions, and overcoming a fear.

Education Required

A bachelor's degree in therapeutic recreation or recreation with an option in therapeutic recreation is the standard requirement for most jobs. A master's degree and doctoral degree are also available in this profession.

Most employees require therapeutic recreation specialists to be certified. Since 1981, the National Council for Therapeutic Recreation Certification (NCRTC) has been the nationally recognized organization to certify therapeutic recreation specialists. Candidates eligible to become a Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist (CTRS) from NCRTC can apply to take the CTRS exam if they have a baccalaureate degree or higher from an accredited college/university with a major in therapeutic recreation or a major in recreation with an option in therapeutic recreation. An applicant must show a degree verified by an official transcript that includes course and field work as described by the certification paths available. CTRS offers two types of certifications: CTRS Academic Path and the CTRS Equivalency Path (A & B). Some certification standards will be revised December 2002.

In 1999, the NCRTC accredited 43 therapeutic recreation programs. In total, there are 117 preparation training programs available in the United States. Typical undergraduate courses are human anatomy and physiology, medical and psychiatric terminology, characteristics of illnesses and disabilities, use of adaptive and medical equipment, therapeutic recreation program design evaluation, and management and professional practices.

Personal Qualities

Therapeutic recreation specialists in schools are optimistic, patient, and enjoy working with students of all ages and with a variety of disabilities. They work well independently but are also good team players with other health care professionals. Therapeutic recreation specialists have excellent observation skills, are creative in adapting activities for their students, and can persuade a reluctant child to join an activity. They also possess very good communication and record keeping skills.

Job Outlook and Advancement

According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics and NTRS, there are thirty thousand therapeutic recreation specialists who currently hold jobs in the United States. Employment of therapeutic recreation specialists is expected to continue to rise through 2005. Most of the employment opportunities will be in retirement centers, nursing homes, hospitals, and rehabilitation facilities. Persons with advanced degrees in therapeutic recreation are eligible for positions as program directors and supervisors, and college teachers.

How to Prepare for a Career

Hospitals, nursing homes, community recreation centers, and local Special Olympics committees are good sources of experience for the recreation specialist. Inquire if they have any volunteer opportunities for teenagers. Find out if your school system employs a therapeutic recreation specialist. If yes, ask to talk to the specialist about his or her job. Special education teachers in your school can direct you to resources and organizations on this profession or might have a personal contact with someone who is employed as a therapeutic recreation specialist.

High school students interested in a career as a therapeutic recreation specialist should take classes in English, science, physical education, art, music, and drama.

RESOURCES

American Therapeutic Recreation Association

1414 Prince Street, Suite 204
Alexandria, VA 22314
703-683-9420
703-683-9431 Fax
www.atra-tr.org

National Council for Therapeutic Recreation Certification (NCTRC)

7 Elmwood Drive
New York, NY 10956
914-639-1439
914-639-1471 Fax
E-mail: nctrc@nctrc.org
www.nctrc.org

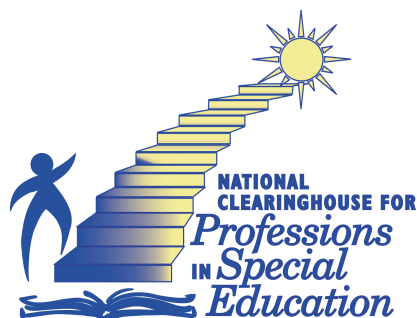
National Therapeutic Recreation Society (NTRS)

22377 Belmont Ridge
Ashburn, VA 20148
703-858-0784
703-858-0794 Fax
E-mail: NTRSNRPA@aol.com
www.nrpa.org/branches/ntrs.htm



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