

8 Important Tips For Working With A Special Needs Child

Tips from a mom of a child with special needs.

As the population of children with special needs continues to grow, more and more scout leaders, soccer coaches, librarians, music teachers and other adults are working with these children for the first time. Many of these adults are volunteers who generously give their time and expertise; others are trained in their field, but have little knowledge of disabilities. Here are 8 important tips for people who will be working with a special child.

1. Interact

The biggest mistake that adults make when they meet a child with special needs is failing to interact with the child. First, introduce yourself and explain how you are connected to the child. Depending on the child's special needs, it may be necessary to take the child's hand, place a hand on the child's shoulder or even touch each other's faces to make a proper introduction. Then explain the activity that you will be doing with the child. Explain 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.

3. Use Common Sense

Put safety first and arrange the environment for physical and emotional comfort.

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 another person understand and master new skills.

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. In a community art class, a child may have difficulty understanding some

concepts; but when those same concepts are presented in a game or hands-on art project, they make more sense.

5. Be Consistent

If a set of rules is presented to the group, apply those rules consistently to everyone. It is helpful for instructors to state all of the expectations and the day's schedule at the beginning of the session.

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.

You can use index cards with simple written instructions to help a child remember the rules for appropriate behavior. If the child does not read, substitute a hand-drawn cartoon or other picture for the words. You can sing a song or use a verbal countdown to signal a switch between activities. Tactile cues such as gently touching a person's shoulder, offering a soft object, or providing silly putty are easy ways to mark a transition and get a person's attention.

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 wrong. 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. One adult may be unable to interact with a child because of negative attitudes and assumptions, but another adult with no experience or knowledge may be able to jump right in and changed a life for the better.

<http://www.friendshipcircle.org/blog/2012/10/15/8-important-tips-for-working-with-a-special-needs-child/>