**8 Important Tips For Working With A Special Needs Child**

As the population of children with special needs continues to grow, more and more scout leaders, soccer coaches, religious education instructors, librarians, music teachers and other adults are finding themselves working with these children for the first time.

Here are eight important tips you should pass on to people who will be working with your special child.

**1. Interact**

The biggest mistake that adults make when they meet someone with a disability is failing to interact with him.  The same rules of polite conversation apply to adults and children.

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.  If you’re not sure what you’re seeing, ask the child’s parents or other adults for advice.

**3. Use Common Sense**

My son had a negative experience in an adapted swimming class many years ago.  The children in the class ranged in age from 3 to 18, and the two instructors had the children sit on the edge of the pool with their feet in the water while they took turns working individually with each child.

There were several problems with this plan. First, the water was deep and the children sitting at the edge were in constant danger of falling in.  Second, the children were shivering while they waited for their turn, which heightened their anxiety and overall discomfort.  Third, the younger children all cried when one of the instructors swam up and suddenly scooped them into the water away from their parents.

All of these problems could have been avoided easily with common sense: put safety first and arrange the environment for physical and emotional comfort.

**4. Be Flexible**

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 religious education 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.

When I signed up Louie for a pottery class a few years later, Louie had an instructor who stated all of his expectations and the day’s schedule at the beginning of class.  The instructor kept track of the students like Louie who needed extra support and assigned teaching assistants to sit with those students.  My son flourished in this classroom because of the instructor’s consistency – even though the instructor had no previous experience with students with disabilities.

**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.  I bring a camera everywhere and get photos of my son’s regular routines and favorite places.  Louie sorts through the photos in an album or on the computer; sometimes we make the photos into a storybook about an activity.

We also use index cards with simple written instructions to help Louie remember the rules for appropriate behavior – if your child does not read, substitute a hand-drawn cartoon or other picture for the words.

Yesterday I was volunteering in the school library and I heard a first grade teacher softly singing instructions to her students.  As soon as she started singing, every single student became quiet and attentive.  Other auditory cues are clapping, snapping or whistling.  I used to have a neighbor who whistled a unique tune to call his children home to dinner every evening.  It worked every time – his children responded by whistling the same tune as they ran home.

Tactile cues such as gently touching a person’s shoulder, offering a blanket or other soft fabric, or providing silly putty are easy ways to mark a transition and get a person’s attention.  On a few occasions I have seen people try to grab or push Louie to get his attention during an activity, which is never a good idea.  He loses his balance easily, and it only confuses him without re-directing his 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 badly.  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.  I’ve seen highly trained specialists unable to interact with Louie because of their negative attitude and assumptions.  But some people with no experience or knowledge of his disability have jumped right in and changed his life for the better.  That’s why we keep signing up for more activities.

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