



## Working with children with special needs – what’s behind the label?

by Dr Rebecca Williams

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If you’re an outdoor instructor working with children at the moment, you have probably run into a whole load of children with a whole load of labels recently. ADHD, ASD, LD, DAMP, dyspraxia, dyslexia etc etc ó sure they mean that the children have special educational needs, but what do they actually mean to you as an instructor? I’ll briefly talk you through the most common types of special educational needs and how they might impact on your session with the kids.

**Learning disability** ó this is a problem with the development of the brain, and affects around 2.5% of the population. The severity of learning disability (previously called mental retardation, sometimes the term learning difficulties is used interchangeably) can vary, but children typically have problems in all areas of development ó physical coordination, attention and concentration, communication, problem solving, and social skills.

**What you need to do:** Try to use less talking and keep it simple, more visual demos or prompt cards. Use the person’s name so they know you are talking to them. People with LD often have a history of repeated failures, so keep goals very small and easily achievable, with lots of praise for success.

**ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder)** ó a bit of a controversial label, children have unusual levels of over active behaviour for their age, problems staying on task (easily distracted) and struggle to block out irrelevant things in their environment. Consequently their behaviour can often be very difficult to manage, difficult to keep safe, and they are often wrongly seen as ‘just naughty’. Children with this label are often on medication such as Ritalin. They can seem very disorganised and forgetful, lose their stuff etc.

**What you need to do:** Check they have taken their meds. Choose your venue very carefully if climbing as you will need eyes in the back of your head to keep them safe. Make sure you have their attention before giving any instruction. Waiting can often be a problem for these kids, so try to keep them occupied at all times, or use a timer (your watch with a beep will do) that they have hold of to let them know how long they have to wait. Children with ADHD often respond well to being given some responsibility as it keeps them occupied and makes them feel good about themselves. Print out a picture kit list that you tape into their rucksack so they have a reminder of what they should have with them.

**Autism, Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)** ó Again, this is a disorder with varying levels of severity, but all children with ASD share 3 common features. They have significant

difficulties with communication, social skills and imagination. Communication problems can include difficulties with nonverbal as well as verbal communication (both understanding spoken language and expressing themselves verbally). Social skills deficits can include not seeing themselves as part of the group, problems understanding social rules such as why it's a good thing to behave like everyone else. If a child's problems are quite severe, then saying things like 'good' might be meaningless to them, and they might prefer a tangible reward (a toy, choccy etc) instead. Problems with imagination mean these children really struggle with problem solving, as we use our imagination to work out how things might be different if we try a different solution. Children with ASD are often very very anxious, and they might also have a concurrent learning disability.

**What you need to do:** Always use their name first so they know you are talking to them. Give tangible rewards for completing activities which are easily achievable as opposed to just praising (eg access to a toy for 5 mins once they have done a climb). Keep your language simple and concrete. Don't talk too much as this can often make people anxious if they don't understand you. Give a 5 minute warning before something is finished. Children with ASD are often very visual, so picture timetables are often very effective, and they might also use a communication system called PECS (picture exchange communication system) so make sure you know what to do by asking their teacher/ helper. Watch out for sensory sensitivities (disliking certain sounds, textures etc) so you might need to try to keep the noise down, particularly in an echoey climbing wall for example.

**Learning difficulties** so this is a catch all term used to cover things like dyslexia (problems with reading, writing and spelling, and often organisation & sequencing), dyspraxia (a coordination problem which can affect gross and fine movement, sometimes speech as well, and making children struggle with organising themselves and getting things in the right sequence), DAMP (again an umbrella term used for children who are a bit clumsy, have some attention problems, and who have some social skills problems), as well as non-specific delays in learning.

**What you can do:** If you are teaching skills such as putting on a harness, tying on, etc, it's helpful to have a sequenced picture to follow so the kids know what to do first, second, third etc. Again, children often don't want to try too hard because they are used to failing, so you need to make sure they get quick success and lots of praise early on.

**Behaviour problems:** Just a quick note about behaviour problems. Children mainly act out because they want social attention, want access to a thing (a tangible), or because they want to escape/ avoid a demand (in that order). The basic principle for you as an instructor is to turn the 'volume and drama' (praise, talking, facial expression, general fuss) UP for any behaviours you want to see more of so this can be in the child themselves, and the other children in the group. Getting children to notice and praise good behaviour in each other is also helpful. If you have to intervene with problem behaviour, turn the 'volume' and drama right DOWN. So, say you have to take a rock off a child because they are threatening to throw it at someone else, do it with minimal talking, blank face, and then praise the kids who are sitting quietly. The second your child starts behaving slightly better, heap on the attention. If you spend lots of time telling kids off, for some kids who are quite starved of attention in other situations, it will only make things worse and make the behaviour more likely to happen, just by giving them lots of attention for it (even though it's negative attention). Positive approaches work best so long winded negotiation, argument or taking things away (punishment) does not have a lasting impact if children have established behaviour problems.

Your best allies in working with children with special needs are your eyes and ears. Ask their teacher/ helper what works well, what doesn't work so well, be observant, and reflect on your own practice to see whether you are making a connection.

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