
Guide for VBS Buddy for Heroes with Special Needs!

Thank you, VBS Buddy!

All children are God's Heroes who need to experience the love of Jesus Christ through caring adults and teens. As a VBS Buddy for kids with special needs, you have a unique opportunity to show God's love to a group of students who often feel overlooked and misunderstood. Thank you for volunteering to embrace these children and help include them in the fantastic fun of VBS!

Inclusion or Classroom?

Inclusion enables students with special needs to experience VBS alongside their peers in regular classrooms. If you are serving as a VBS Buddy in an inclusion setting, think of yourself as a kind of interpreter between your Hero and his/her classmates. For some typical students, this will be their first exposure to a friend with special needs. Help your Hero engage and participate at the level appropriate to her/his ability, but also help the other Heroes (students) get to know and understand another Hero and his/her behaviors and needs.

Self-contained classrooms can be helpful when a large number of Heroes with special needs are present, or when the need for environmental adaptations is prohibitive for regular classrooms. If you are a Buddy in a special needs classroom, be sure not only to help your Hero participate, but also to be sensitive to the needs of other Heroes.



Speak the Language

Mastering a few key phrases, techniques, and pleasant tones can greatly improve your ability to communicate with Heroes with special needs. Here are a few particularly effective strategies:

1. Child First Language: When speaking about a Hero with special needs, use the phrase "a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder," or "a child on the autism spectrum," not "an autistic kid." This helps to put the focus on the individual rather than on the disability.
2. It can be offensive to address a person with a disability or delay with "baby talk." Always speak age-appropriately to your Hero, using simple terms and short sentences if needed.
3. For students with cognitive or behavioral difficulties, give specific instructions instead of appealing to reason or logic. A friendly, "Go to the snack table, please" is much easier to process and more effective than "It's time for snacks!" or "Don't you want a cookie?"
4. Use "First/Then" language to help with transitions and non-preferred activities. Example: "First, we are going to the Crafts Station; then, we'll get a snack."
5. Give time limit warnings to help with transitions as well. Example: "5 more minutes and then we are going to put our crafts away for snack time!" This help kids with sensory disorders and intense need for structure to prepare themselves for the change.
6. For students with language impairments, learn a few sign language phrases to help with communication. Look up and learn the phrases:

"all done"	"go"
"stop"	"potty"
"eat"	"please"
"want"	"thank you"

Hero Hotline Leader Resources

Be Prepared!

Load up your Buddy utility belt with these tools to help your Heroes conquer any challenges she/he may face during VBS!

- Provide fidgets (comforting items to hold while transitioning or sitting quietly). Good examples include small vibrating toys, koosh balls, squeeze or stretchy toys, or anything with an interesting texture that is not small enough to swallow.
- Use hand-over-hand assistance (guiding a student's hands so he/she may complete a craft or song motion successfully). Be sure your Hero is comfortable with this; don't insist!
- Use noise-reduction headphones and/or ear plugs for loud situations or music time.
- Provide visual schedules (a layout of each day's activities with times and fun images) to help students know what to expect and prepare for what's next. This can make a world of difference when it comes to transitions!
- If a student is mobility impaired, please get detailed info from parents/families about transfers in and out of wheelchairs or walkers. Many students are not safe or sufficiently independent to do this without assistance.
- Have a "Break" space (a room, corner, or other secluded space where Heroes may go to take a break from stimulation and/or to reset).
- Flexibility is key! The behaviors of Heroes with special needs can be easily misinterpreted by others. Your Hero may appear to be playing or distracted when she/he is actually listening actively while processing sensory input. Allow your Hero to experience and worship God in his/her own unique way!
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Know the Difference

Autism is an increasingly prevalent variation in brain function resulting in difficulties with social interaction, sensory processing, and communication. Autism symptoms are unique to each individual, but some common ones include: repetitive speech, sounds, or movements; listening masked by fidgeting or playing; difficulty with transitions; and intense need for routine/structure. All children with autism are not the same and may function at differently depending on levels or sides of the autism spectrum.

Cerebral palsy (CP) occurs as a result of brain injury at or before birth. It can be accompanied by developmental delays, paraplegia (paralysis or underdevelopment in the legs), quadriplegia (underdevelopment in all four limbs), spastic (overly tight) muscles, hypotonia (loose or low muscle tone), or chorea (jerky, uncontrolled movements).

Developmental delays accompany many neurological disabilities or differences and can occur in speech, motor skills, emotional development, cognition, or a combination of the above. It's important to set expectations for these children with respect to their own developmental stages rather than their appearance and their peers' abilities.

Down Syndrome is a genetic condition typically characterized by smaller stature, low muscle tone, and developmental delays. These kids may have trouble with some fine and gross motor skills, but are usually eager to participate.

Sensory processing disorders (SPDs) can be present independently or as a symptom of a diagnosis. SPDs can cause oversensitivity to sounds, smells, lights, or movement; and children may be easily overwhelmed by seemingly harmless things like large gatherings, messy or dirty skin, clothing textures, and certain foods. SPDs can also manifest as under-responsiveness and a craving for sensory input. These children tend to seek movement and messy play, and may be unaware of mess on their hands or of you talking to them.

HERO HOTLINE LEADER RESOURCES