

Guide for VBS Buddies

Thank you, VBS Buddy!

All children need to experience the love of Jesus Christ through caring adults and teens. As a VBS Buddy for children with differing abilities, 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 help include everyone in the fantastic fun of VBS!

Inclusion or Classroom?

Inclusion enables students with differing abilities to experience VBS alongside their peers in regular classrooms. If you are serving as a VBS Buddy in an inclusion setting, help include your buddy in all aspects of the classroom, making sure that they are noticed and included. Help your buddy engage and participate at the level appropriate to her/his ability, but also help the other VBS participants get to know and understand your buddy and his/her behaviors and needs.

Self-contained classrooms can be helpful when a large number of VBS participants with differing abilities are present, or when the need for environmental adaptations is prohibitive for regular classrooms. If you are a Buddy in a differing abilities classroom, be sure not only to help your buddy participate, but also to be sensitive to the needs of all other children in the room.



Communicate with Ease

Mastering a few key phrases, techniques, and pleasant tones can greatly improve your ability to communicate with VBS participants with differing abilities. Here are a few particularly effective strategies:

1. **Child First Language:** When speaking about a child with a disability or differing abilities, use the phrase “a child on the Autism spectrum,” or “a child with Cerebral Palsy,” not “an autistic child.” 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 buddy, using simple terms and short sentences if needed.
3. For children 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: “Five more minutes and then we are going to put our crafts away for snack time!” This helps children with sensory disorders and intense need for structure to prepare themselves for the change.
6. For children with language impairments, learn a few sign language phrases to help with communication. Look up and learn the phrases:

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| “all done” | “go” |
| “stop” | “potty” |
| “eat” | “please” |
| “want” | “thank you” |

Be Prepared!

Load up your Buddy utility belt with these tools to help your VBS participants approach any challenges she/he may face during VBS with confidence and comfort:

- Provide fidgets (comforting items to hold during transitions or when sitting quietly). Good examples include small toys that vibrate, squishy 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 child's hands so he/she may complete a craft or song motion successfully). Be sure your buddy 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 children know what to expect and prepare for what's next. This can make a world of difference when it comes to transitions!
- If a participant is mobility impaired, please get detailed info from parents/families about transfers in and out of wheelchairs or walkers. Many children are not safe or sufficiently independent to do this without assistance.
- Have a "break" space (a room, corner, or other secluded space where VBS participants may go to take a break from stimulation and/or to reset).
- Flexibility is key! The behaviors of VBS participants with differing abilities can be easily misinterpreted by others. Your buddy may appear to be playing or distracted when she/he is actually listening actively while processing sensory input. Allow your buddy to experience and worship God in his/her own unique way!

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 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.

There are many other disabilities that are not listed. Be sure to communicate with your buddy's families; they are the experts and can usually give you vital information to help you best serve your buddy.