

Understanding Kids With Disabilities In Climbing

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in [CWA Blog](#)



We all know how beneficial climbing is for humans.

So many of us spend hours a day with aching muscles, bleeding hands, and often shattered egos because we love it. Climbing provides a sense of stability and accomplishment that humans crave, yet something we don't seem to talk about enough is how it affects people with disabilities – people who experience the world differently than most do.

Article At A Glance

- **Writer:** Addy Cowley of [Sportrock Climbing Centers, VA.](#), and a new writer with the CWA (welcome Addy!) She works in the coaching and training sphere and has a focus on mental health advocacy.
- **Who Should Read:** This article is for management, coaches and trainers, and programming professionals in indoor climbing gyms.
- **What Will You Learn:** How to help kids with disabilities get more out of your programming.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** Explore our work on the theory of creating programming for adaptive athletes [here](#).

I'm the head coach of my gym's youth recreational team as well as a camp counselor, sensory climbing teacher, and private instructor. I've worked with children for a long time and have had the opportunity to see firsthand how beneficial climbing can be for people with disabilities,

especially children.

I've loved every second of working with these kids. I've seen the mental and physical fortitude it takes for someone as young as six years old to push themselves past what they perceive as a "limit".

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

Definition: *"Children with ADHD may have trouble paying attention, controlling impulsive behaviors (may act without thinking about what the result will be), or be overly active."*

(Source: CDC)

I've spent a decent amount of time frustrated by certain athletes with a tendency to talk over coaches, break rules, and cause trouble with other kids. Only when I did some reflecting on myself did I realize that it's because they see the world in a different way.

Kids who have ADHD need constant stimulation to focus. They aren't attempting to be rude; their brains work differently than peers without ADHD. Society expects social interactions to go a certain way, and that isn't always compatible with their brains.

To help, give them a carabiner or forearm strengtheners to play with, let them take climb breaks during instruction (I usually let my ADHD youth demonstrate moves so they associate lessons with excitement), and maybe teach them basic knots to practice while listening.

READ ALSO: Is Adaptive Climbing Part of Your Gym?

I have one climber on the team that has such severe ADHD that it's hard for him to speak, let alone sit still. We give him things to look forward to; for example, if he stays in his seat for five minutes, we'll give him a "challenge".

Sometimes it's a movement-based activity, like 20 jumping jacks or a dead hang, and sometimes it's solving a boulder problem with one foot — he loves it.

Climbing is amazing for attention issues — climbers are forced to focus on what is happening in the moment and they can learn through physical activity (and at their own pace).

Remember and use that as a source.

Tip: This applies to children with anger issues or other forms of emotional difficulties, as well. **Use climbing to their advantage, not yours.** If you can sense someone starting to get angry, ask them what they'd like to do and what helps them (maybe talk to their parents about strategies) and

work your way up from there. Oftentimes, all they need is to climb some easier walls that they know they can complete without struggle.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Definition: *"People with ASD may behave, communicate, interact, and learn in ways that are different from most other people. There is often nothing about how they look that sets them apart from other people. The abilities of people with ASD can vary significantly."* (Source: CDC)

I've seen autism extremely often in climbing gyms.

Depending on where they are on the spectrum, the sensory stimulation of holds and climbing is fantastic for development. Whenever I lead sensory climbing classes, I leave a bunch of foam balls, carabiners, harnesses, and other equipment on the floor that they can touch and play around with to their own desire.

If you get overwhelmed by their constant activity or are nervous about not being able to communicate comfortably with them, it's easiest to let the children be the decider of your relationship.

If they want to run around, let them run around. If they aren't interested in talking to you, **don't force it**. You can offer them belays, but if they are uninterested, let them run around.

These kids spend all day being pushed to uphold society's expectations of them, so let them use climbing as a resource to decide what they want to do and what's going to help them the most. No one knows them better than themselves.

Another tip: communicate with the parents before working with children with severe autism. Parents might request minimal social interaction, low lights, etc. Safety should always come first!

It can be overwhelming, especially if you feel like you're messing up. Take a step back and remember that you are simply a resource to encourage climbing; if they don't want to use you, don't force it.

I know it's easier said than done, but the fact that you're trying probably means a lot to their parents, as well as the kids themselves.

Physical Disabilities

Physical disabilities include an extremely wide range of issues. From blindness and being deaf to losing limbs, digits, (or the use of them), physical disabilities are prevalent. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 4.3% of children in the U.S. have a physical disability. In adults, the statistic is even higher at 27 percent.

When it comes to physical disabilities, the best thing you can do for climbers is to let them decide *their* strengths and weaknesses. For example, I have a boy on our team that has immobility in his left arm. This sounds obvious, but you'd be surprised how many people need to hear this: if he says he can't reach something, don't push him, but also never tell him to give up and do another climb (unless he decides that is best).

It is your job as a coach to work with him through his limitations, just as you would do if any other athlete was struggling on a certain grade. Use your experience to suggest different positions or moves he can do to work around it and keep a sense of humility.

Listen to your athletes; they know what they are talking about.

I have another climber on the team who is mostly deaf. She is sweet and extremely hardworking but often feels isolated from her peers. We have a microphone that we pass around from coach to coach depending on who is working with her, but before every practice, we ask her what she needs. She sometimes wants a coach to work with her the whole time.

On other days, she just needs a coach by her side to interact with the other climbers and collaborate. Again, just listen. You'd be surprised how mature a lot of kids can be despite their age.

Climbing is an incredible tool; we just need to learn to use it to its full advantage.

We, coaches, are allowed to mold an entire generation of climbers and use our jobs for good. Have patience and hear the children out-- this job is more important than many.

Meet A Non-Profit Who Can Help Get You Started

Adaptive Climbing Group is a non-profit that helps indoor climbing gyms make their programming more accessible. The organization runs operations in four states around the U.S., and does consultations for operations. Learn more about their programs and how they work with your indoor climbing gyms.

About the Author



Addy Cowley works at Sportrock Climbing Centers Sterling, VA as manager and head coach for the gym's recreational team. Growing up in four countries and traveling around dozens more, she picked up a passion for adventure that is apparent in her writing. Addy works hard to use her motivation and skills to foster a positive environment at Sportrock, encouraging the next generation of climbers to be the best they can be. She's passionate about climbing (of course), social justice, the importance of journalism, and mental health advocacy.

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