

## TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR TOURS WITH CHILDREN

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Children currently come to the Garden with their families and sometimes with school groups. Kids typically have considerable enthusiasm and curiosity and don't queue up quietly like adults. Outside experiences for kids in parks, beaches and on hiking trails encourage appreciation for exploration and discovery of animals and plants that they will bring with them. Most kids will not have encountered the contemplative aesthetic of the Garden in an outdoor setting but can certainly learn. A good experience now can bring them back over and over again as they grow up and engender a deep appreciation of the multifaceted spirit of the Japanese Garden. As adults, they will join the ranks of active supporters and could follow in our footsteps.

This module is intended to provide some practical guidance and background to enable us to give children optimal experiences while visiting the Garden. Sometimes it can seem like children come in a bewildering mix of sizes and abilities that can only make for chaos. They have probably grown up with a somewhat different set of expectations from their parents (and culture). Most of us were simply told to "go play and be back in time for dinner" and did not have electronic devices competing for our attention. While each child is unique, there are some reasonably predictable pathways to typical child development that can enable us to understand and tailor a tour to be successful. These pathways undergo alteration when a child has a developmental disability. Current understanding of these altered pathways has progressed substantially over the last few decades. This module will present some basic information regarding children with neurodevelopmental disabilities to enable us to expand participation in the Garden for all kids including those with disabilities.

### TIPS FOR WORKING WITH CHILDREN:

- **Set clear expectations.** Everyone does better if they know what to expect and what is expected of them.
- Consider starting with simple social introductions that kids are usually used to from school. Something like asking each child to say their name, maybe grade in school and if they have ever been to the Garden before. Some kids may know about vegetable gardens but not a place like the Garden.
- Kids often respond well to a game to focus their attention. For instance, in the Garden, one can talk briefly about stone lanterns at the first one and then ask the kids to see how many others they can find during the tour. Be sure to follow up at the end: "How many lanterns did you see?"

- Make sure to speak clearly, in simple sentences and normal voice. You might need to repeat or restate a comment.
- Use lots of gesture and facial expression to augment your words. *Be creative!* Use visuals or physically move to the location you want to point out.
- ***Be patient!*** Make sure to give kids an opportunity to express themselves. Draw them out: “Can you tell me more..” “Did you mean..,” Do not abruptly finish thoughts or sentences.
- Feel free to ask a child to repeat themselves if you do not understand or check with a parent/teacher who might understand more easily.
- ***Use positive reinforcement!*** Try “Be gentle” or “stay on the path” instead of saying “Do not pull the leaf” or “Do not go on the grass.” It doesn’t hurt to point out that some wild animals (turtles, birds and other Garden critters) might hide if there is a lot of noise. On the other hand, the koi are attracted since they are used to being fed.
- ***Kids are sensitive.*** Pay attention to your body language and how you are expressing yourself. Are you upset or stressed? How might this impact the children? Kids are usually most comfortable when you are just being yourself and interacting with them.
- ***Be aware of differences!*** Typically developing kids have a lot in common at a given age but also much variation. Due to their delays in development a child with a disability might communicate or behave in ways that are *much* younger than their apparent age. For example, an 8 year-old with an intellectual disability might have the language abilities of a 5 year-old. Again, it is important to meet them where they are developmentally.
- ***Have fun!*** Finally, they are children after all. Being light and having fun is often the best way to really make any tour enjoyable.

Most importantly, every child is different. So ask those that know the child best. *The parent/teacher is the expert on their child.* Ask them about the best ways to communicate. Most parents will know if their child learns best by watching, listening or “hands on.” Most children use all of these means.

#### WHAT TO BE AWARE OF AND WHAT HELPS WITH CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

The following are some common characteristics that a children with neurodevelopmental disabilities share and how to address them. Again keep in mind that no child experiences a disability the same.

##### **Sensitivity to sound, smell, taste, touch:**

- Be aware of crowds and any unexpected sounds. Luckily the Japanese Garden is a peaceful place, however crowds can be an issue for some children.
- They might also LIKE to touch and feel things! Make sure they know to be gentle with the plants.
- For some kids, textures can be soothing and is a way for them to interact with their environment.

**Structure:** Children like to know what is coming up next. They respond well to repetition and clear rules.

- Tell the children what the tour will be like. How long it will take. What route they will take. What they will be doing. Let them know what is coming up. This will help them manage their behavior and their expectations.
- Be clear about where they can walk. What they can touch. Explain some rules in a positive manner.
- Despite the structure, *Be flexible*. Plans might change, you might need to move faster/slower. *Listen to your audience*.

**Communication:** Communication happens in more ways than words.

- Pay attention to body language. A child might need a break or it might help to move along faster.
- Pictures and visuals are often helpful in communication.
- Ask the parent/teacher, if you need help communicating.

**Visuals:** Many children with disabilities are visual thinkers and long verbal descriptions might be challenging.

- Use lots of pictures!
- Show them, in addition to explaining it to them. Visual items such as pictures or objects are good tools. Having a bag of props might be useful as well.

**Strengths:** Encourage them to contribute and be part of the group. Help them become involved with the tour. Let their strengths shine.

## TROUBLESHOOTING BEHAVIORAL DIFFICULTIES

For many children with neurodevelopmental disabilities, difficult behavior can be “triggered” for a variety of reasons. They may have difficulty communicating emotions and regulating their behavior, “meltdowns” or behavior outbursts can happen, particularly in new environments.

Here are some potential causes that you should be aware of.

- **Focus/Attention**
  - They might be bored or not engaged with the activity.
  - Movement and introducing new activities will help keep them focused.
- **Expectations**
  - As mentioned before, children with neurodevelopmental disabilities often do not behave or act in ways that we expect of typical children.

- They might become frustrated if you give them a task they cannot do or present it in a way that they do not understand.
- Make sure to not to ask too much. Meet the child where they are developmentally.
- **Lack of Structure**
  - Be clear of what the rules are. Make sure they know. Use pictures/physically show them.
  - They might want to climb trees or play in water. Tell them the rules **before** they get to the tree or water.

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