

Service, Support and Success

The Direct Support Workers Newsletter

Inclusive, Exclusive Vacations: Planning Vacations for People with Significant Needs



By: Angie Nethercott & Dave Hingsburger

“I really like the newsletter and I have an idea of something you should write about. I am finding writing this email difficult so I don’t think I’d be a good person to write it. I am about to retire and I was thinking about what I am proud of, but also what I regret. There was a man I worked with more than ten years ago now. He always wanted to go on a holiday, but never did while I was there. I always said that he shouldn’t go on a vacation because he had bad behaviours and that he would not be able to cope with change.

All of us staff agreed and we said that it was for his own good that he stay at home. In my heart, I knew that the reason we said this was because it would of made a lot more work for us staff. Every summer he was really sad because all of his friends got to go on holidays, but he stayed home. After I left, a bunch of other staff left too. The new staff took him on lots of vacations. I think you should write about how even if it’s a lot of work, people should get to have a holiday. What I did was wrong and I’m sorry.”

Vacations are important. We all need breaks from ‘real life’ so that we can get back to what’s real about life. When this email arrived, we were planning this month’s newsletter. We thought it was so important that we’ve moved things around so that we could fit this into the summer season. The writer of the email was gracious enough to allow us to publish her email. Before tackling the topic, we would both like to say that this email is a great example of someone who takes time to think about her work and learn from her mistakes – this kind of thoughtful reflection is so important for anyone who wants to learn and grow.

The first thing that needs to be said about vacations is that they always involve a lot of work. The idea that vacations are magical come from our childhoods where suddenly we were whisked away to destinations ... parks, beaches, grandma and grandpa’s backyard. The fact that our parents worked hard planning, preparing and packing may have escaped our notice. Once adulthood hits and we are left to do that stuff ourselves, we realize that while holidays are great – they are always a lot of work. We’re going to suggest here that, when planning a vacation for someone with either significant behavioural or medical needs, it involves the same process as it did when your parents took you on a vacation – planning, preparing and packing – it’s just that what you plan, what you prepare and what you pack may be a little different.

Planning

In order to plan for a vacation, it's best to consider what we mean by a vacation. Many people think of a vacation as a trip or as a two week break ... vacations don't necessarily mean travelling long distances or for long periods of time. A vacation can be as short as a few hours; it can be as near as the park down the street. A vacation is really just a welcome break from the routine, a time to relax, a time to do things that you normally don't have time to do. It's possible to feel like you've had a vacation if you've had an afternoon curled on the couch, reading a book and napping while your kids are off visiting their grandparents for the day. It's possible to feel like you've had a vacation when you decide to pull out of heavy traffic and stop to wander through a local park waiting for the traffic to die down. Heck, you can feel like you've had a vacation when you've taken a break from a report to play Free Cell for ten minutes on the computer. Vacations also don't need to cost a lot of money. Wandering through a park looking at artwork on display, going to a craft show or sitting on a dock watching the boats go by are inexpensive ways to take a vacation from the normal routine. Vacations are about doing things that give pleasure or that give opportunities to see and do new things. Milton Berle summed it up when he said, "Laughter is an instant vacation."

- 1) Where to Go and What to Do: Rule number one when working with someone with a disability who is planning a holiday is simple: Hush! It's not your vacation. Vacations are very idiosyncratic. What I want to do on a vacation may bore you. What you want to do on vacation may horrify me. That's what's cool about vacations – they are about what someone wants to do, what kinds of things they find either fun or relaxing. Therefore, it's important that the person be involved in planning their own vacation. It's important to not enter the planning process with a 'no' orientation. In knowing that a person may not be able to participate in certain activities because of concerns or risks, have them make up a list that can be gone over later in more detail. This list will get you started. When planning for someone who has problems with children, shouting 'no' every time they mention an idea... park NO! swimming NO! movies NO! ... is not helpful. When discussing possibilities, write them all down without negative commentary. You are just making a list after all.

- 2) But: Some of you might now be thinking: but the people I work with wouldn't be able to make a list, they wouldn't be able to tell me where they want to go or what they want to do. What do we do then? Good question. People with more significant disabilities may not be able to sit with you and outline a list of vacation ideas or possibilities. But they are able, often very clearly able, to communicate what it is they like doing and things that they enjoy. Knowing that someone likes the sound of classical music makes drawing up a list fairly easy to do. Knowing that they also like the taste of Caribbean food increases the possible vacation activities or destinations enough to fill the summer. Just two facts about someone's likes and preferences make it easy. One young man loves, LOVES, taking a ride through the center of the city at night. He likes the windows open, he likes feeling the breeze, hearing the noises from the street and seeing all the brightly lit signs. For him this is equivalent to a cruise down the Nile. For him, this is the essence of vacation.

- 3) **Reviewing the List:** Making a list is only the first part of planning. Then the list needs to be reviewed to determine priorities. Let's say the fellow who likes children made the list mentioned above ... park, swimming, movies ... Well, which of those are possible to do without undue risk. Many pools have adult only swim times, so there's a possibility. Movies are classified such that some will have next to no children – go to those movies for the late show and there will most probably be no children at all. Assist the individual in going through the list to determine what a safe choice is and what's unsafe. This is a process that will help him in everyday situations. If a destination is being discussed, assist the individual in looking up to see if the location has what they need. One fellow wanted to go to a nature reserve on vacation. The staff helped him find a fairly isolated cabin to stay at, as opposed to a nearby large hotel, because the individual needs space where he could be very loud without bothering other people.
- 4) **Involve the Right People:** Remember when reviewing the list to involve the right people. If a Behaviour Therapist is involved, their input is important. If a supervisor needs to be involved to approve the destination or the activity, make sure they are involved too. You don't want to frustrate the individual by setting them up for disappointment.

Preparing

This is where your work really begins. It's important that you look at how the vacation is going to be achieved and that you've done all the planning to make sure it's successful. There are a few things to think about.

- 1) **Risk and Risk Reduction:** As this article is being written about people who have either more significant behavioural issues or more pressing medical issues, issues that may exempt them in the minds of some from being able to vacation, we are assuming that vacations involve fun, but they also involve risk. Take a look at all the things that are concerning and plan to either reduce or eliminate the risk. Again, involve those who need to be involved. A weekend trip or a two hour adventure – it doesn't matter – what matters are that strategies be developed for any eventuality. This is where the knowledge of the Direct Support Professional needs to be invited and considered. No one knows the individual as well as someone who works with them day in and day out. Direct Support Professionals will be able to give ideas and hints for what works and what doesn't. Sadly, our field often makes the mistake of asking the fewest questions of those with the most information – in this process it's vital that that mistake not be made.
- 2) **Staffing:** Staff can make or break any attempt at vacation. A staff that is very vocal about someone not having the 'right' to vacation because of past behaviours, is probably not the best person to be providing vacation assistance. If you, for example, believe that the vacation is just too risky or that the activity is one where you don't think you'll be able to handle the situation if it goes wrong, speak up. If you feel confident, on the other hand, that you'd be able to provide the assistance needed, speak up and volunteer. It's important that people have a vested interest in success.

- 3) Training: Once the risk has been identified and the strategies for reduction of risk put on paper, staff need to be trained in managing situations as they arise. Good ideas on paper are just good ideas on paper, it's translating them into the skill set of every staff that matters. Having involved the Direct Support Professionals in the risk identification and development of risk strategies, there will be – automatically – more credence given to the ideas and more openness to the training.
- 4) Setting Up For Success: Something planned for the future might be exciting; something that's happening tomorrow might be frightening. Some individuals can't cope with sudden surprises so they need to be reminded of the approaching adventure or trip ... others may find the anticipation too difficult and would do better with it happening more unexpectedly. However this needs to be approached, it is important to set the person up for success, help them to be ready for the vacation. It's also important that the individual know that they can change their mind and that changing their mind just means that they can plan something else.

Packing

Packing doesn't always involve suitcases. Packing can simply be taking five minutes to sit and review the risk reduction plan. It can be taking a moment to be briefed and updated before heading out. Packing in information, having it neatly folded and placed in your mental briefcase, ensures that it's handy and readily available.

- 1) It's all portable: Programs. Plans. Equipment. Wheelchairs. Strategies. Medication. It's all portable.

If people are willing, everything is possible ... a simple, but true statement.

There is a small dog park located off a laneway which itself runs off the main road to the larger park. The parking lot is on a rise above a field that slopes down to the beach. There are dogs of every breed possible there and they all just let loose and have fun. They dance in the water, they find sticks, bury sticks, dig up sticks, they chase balls and bring them back, they run around each other barking friendly barks. Almost every other day, throughout the year, you will see a van parked there. Beside the van, you'll see two people sitting on lawn chairs quietly watching the dogs at play. One of those two is a man whose behaviours have deemed him dangerous. The other is a staff who noticed the calming effects that dogs had on the behaviour of a dangerous man. Now the two of them spend quality time, calm time, together. On return from the park, the Direct Support Professional said, "Every time we go, it's like a mini-vacation from restrictions and rules and from programs and protocols; we both get to just take a breather." And that is exactly what a vacation is.

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