



One Small Step

How we can change the lives of children with special needs by understanding what they go through



By Angelina Percell

About Me

Hi! I'm Angelina. I am a freshman at Morris Knolls High School, and I graduated from Valleyview Middle School last year. I have been a proud Denville Girl Scout for the last 10 years.

I created this presentation, as my Silver Award, to help everyone understand the lives of special needs children. I have a younger brother who is a current student at Valleyview; he was diagnosed with Autism and ADHD at the age of 4. He is a high functioning child, so I never truly understood how special needs made him any different from other children. In fact, until he became older, only then did I start to notice how his disabilities affected his life.

Throughout the past year I have had the privilege of working with, and learning about, the special needs and disabilities that are not only seen with students, but around the whole world. During my eighth grade year I was able to mentor students who have special needs in a club called Viking Connections. This summer I was a camp counselor at Limitless, a summer camp in Denville, NJ that is open to students who attend Celebrate The Children, a school for children who have special needs. I worked with an age group ranging from 12-14 year olds, the same ages as middle schoolers.

Working with these children 1:1 was no easy job, but I am beyond grateful that I had the opportunity. It truly taught me so much about these special children, their needs, and how I can help them.





What Are Some Disabilities?

ADHD

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD is a disability that interferes with the functions and development of a person. This can be seen through frequent distraction, or hyperactive and impulsive movement.

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a learning disability that interferes with a person's abilities to read and spell. This can be seen through difficulty in speech, hard time with verbal memory, as well as troubles processing or comprehending verbal information quickly.

Autism

Autism spectrum disorder, or Autism is a disability that includes issues with social skills, repeating behaviors, speech, and communicating non-verbally.

Anxiety

Anxiety is a feeling people get that is seen through tension, worried or intrusive thoughts, and changes in physical elements such as hyperventilating or increased blood pressure.

Deafness

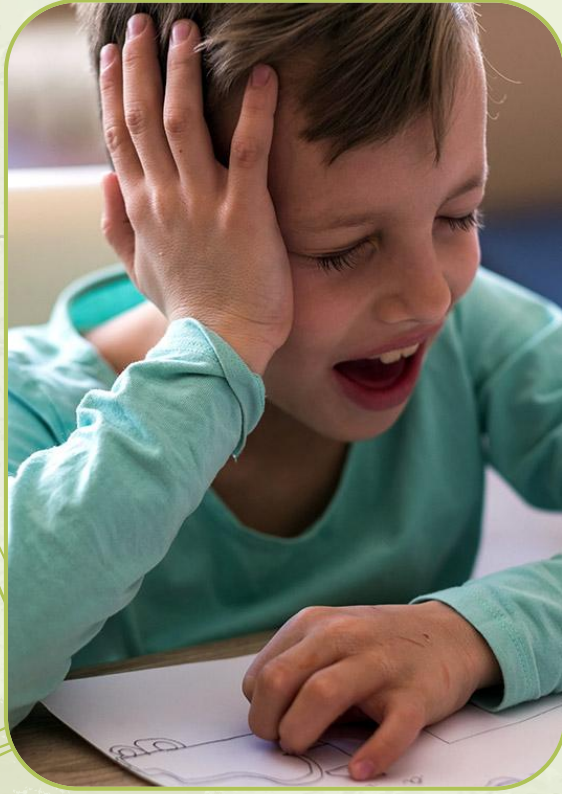
Deafness is partial or complete loss of hearing.

Speech Impairment

A speech impairment is a problem that affects people's educational development including issues with communication, stuttering, articulation of speech, language, or a voice impairment.

Struggles

Any child could struggle, especially in middle school. Here is a list of some of the things children may struggle with during this time of their lives.



Making Friends	Learning/Paying Attention
Bullying	Misunderstood by others
Personal space	Explaining their feelings
Getting pulled out of class	Frustration
Aides accompanying them	Self advocating
Loud noises/overstimulation	Keeping up with the pace of school and school work



IMAGINE

What it's like to be in their shoes

Stress

Imagine you are sitting in class completing a reading assignment. You cannot understand the words because they look all jumbled and messy. Also, the class is very loud, so you cannot focus. Suddenly, everybody else is finished, and you are sitting in your chair with nothing done. This is stress.

Dyslexia

Imagine everyone has to share their group projects in front of the whole class. It is your turn with your partner and you have to read the paper, except you can't comprehend your partner's handwriting. You freeze in front of the whole class. You try making out the words, but they aren't coming out the way they are written on the paper. You keep messing up and everyone is silently giggling. The teacher tries to guide you, which makes you feel frustrated because you want to be independent, and she is talking too fast. This is dyslexia.



Sitting Still

Imagine you are listening to a presentation in school. You keep hearing songs and noises in your head. These distract you and your body starts rocking. Then, your arms start to flail around, and your legs start to shake. You holler random sounds, get up from your seat, and jump up and down uncontrollably. Everyone in the room turns their head to look at you and your aide ushers you out. You can't sit still.

Personal Space

Imagine you are sitting on the bus with a student in your grade. They are playing a game on their phone that has colorful lights, so you lean over to look. They gently move over, but you keep moving closer to see the game. You don't know how to tell them that you want to try to play the game, so instead you try to grab the phone. They immediately see you and tell you to stay away. They move to a different seat, and you feel dejected because you couldn't communicate what you wanted to share.

What we can do to take...SMALL STEPS



Meetings

Meetings with a guidance counselor, teacher, or administrator can benefit a child so they feel understood. Encouraging and planning meetings for the child to advocate their needs could substantially benefit the school environment and the child.



Out-Of-Class Pass

The ability to take a pass and leave the classroom during times of intense stress or situations can help students learn balance and regulate their emotions.



Mentors

Having a designated older peer or an aide to help the child navigate the day, and help with any troubles they are having can be very helpful in a school setting. This can ensure that the children have the comfort of structure; they can go to someone for help if they are being treated unfairly, don't know how to solve a problem, or freeze up during the day.

What we can do to take...SMALL STEPS



IEP and 504 Plans

Encourage and establish individualized education programs (IEPs) or 504 medical disability support plans to help students make sure that they are comfortable with the way that they are being taught. Having a plan established, depending on the severity and type of needs can help them learn more efficiently and make their middle school experience easier. If a student needs accommodations, they should be encouraged to have a conversation with their case manager, counselor, or administrator.



After-school clubs

After-school clubs help children make friends and help them grow socially and educationally. It gives them an experience to express themselves and their interests. Valleyview offers a variety of clubs:

- Art Club
- Book Club
- Builders' Club
- Fantasy Sports Club
- World Language Club
- Mock Trial
- Yearbook Club
- SGA
- STEAM Club
- STEM Club
- Green Team
- Trivia Club
- Viking Connections
- Chorus
- School Play/Musical/Stage Crew
- String Ensemble
- Crusader Band
- Viking Band
- Jazz Band



Lessons to Learn



Not every child is the same

Commonly, we believe that children with special needs all experience the symptoms of their disability the same, however this is not the case. EVERY child has their own needs, wants, expectations, lives, thoughts, and actions that make them UNIQUE! These should be respected and should always be considered when learning how to help a child with a disability.

Perfection

Most children with disabilities have very confusing lives and seek stability. This yearn for stability can easily become an obsession for perfection. It is up to us to teach children that not everything will always be perfect, and that is okay. Everybody makes mistakes, and we have to show that they don't matter and can be resolved.

Forgiveness

Naturally, we all make mistakes. However, when you have a disability that alters your actions, emotions, or abilities it is a lot easier for accidents to occur. At the end of the day teaching children that accidents happen, and not holding them against it is truly what makes a closer bond with the child, and makes them aware that they are not pressured to be perfect.

They aren't any different

One of my biggest suggestions when working with disabled children is to always treat them like how you treat everyone else, and to not baby them. Especially in middle school, they are maturing, so being treated like a teenager instead of a toddler is going to make them more comfortable with their peers, and more likely to listen to you. Children understand your verbal and body language, meaning if you talk to them like a baby, they will feel offended that you are dumbing them down. They aren't any different than other children, so always treat them like it.

Let It Be

One of the things I learned while working with tweens who have special needs is that they will get frustrated, and most of the time it will be over something small. It is our job to let them cool off and have their time to process this frustration. Sometimes the children are genuinely upset, while others just seek attention. Either way, letting them have their time alone, without pestering them immediately can make them feel comforted in a school setting.

Friendships

After making observations, I can tell that people with disabilities, especially when they are becoming teens, tend to find friends who are like minded. However, some friends will be loyal, while others may be fake. Making sure that children who have disabilities have healthy friendships, and are not being manipulated, or used is something easily overlooked. My biggest advice: Encourage the children to be with people who love, relate to, or accept them. These lead to the best friendships that will make children feel appreciated, and confident.

Getting Acclimated To School



School Tour

Before school begins, having the ability to go into the building, find classes, and meet teachers is a great way for children to acclimate to middle school, and one of my biggest suggestions. It is almost like a private orientation where they can make sure they are comfortable with their teachers, lockers, and finding their classrooms.



Practice Time

Having the time to practice some typical middle school procedures is very helpful for disabled children going into middle school. They should practice carrying binders/books, and computers at the same time, as well as practicing how to work a lock/locker.



Know Where To Go

At Valleyview there is always somebody to help. If a child with special needs is having a rough time it is important that they know who to go to. I would recommend going to talk to:

- Case Manager
- Guidance Counselor
- Principal/Vice Principal

How Can You Help?

Parents

- Allow time for your child to acclimate
- Listen to your child
- Reach out for help when your child is struggling
- Ask your child questions about their day
- Only assist when needed

Staff

- Reassure parents that their students are in good hands
- Keep children who struggle close to the teacher's desk and away from the door
- Try to minimize noise and distractions in the classroom
- Be aware of how other students treat them
- Speak up for those struggling

Classmates

- Check in to make sure they are okay
- If you see them struggling, offer to help
- Don't let other students eat lunch alone
- Always include them in group clubs and activities

JOIN THE CLUB!

Viking Connections

a club for children with special needs to socialize and be mentored



People who understand

Games

Making friends

Mentors to guide you

Bonding

Experiences

Fun activities

Parties

FIELD TRIPS

Remember...

Every student can **learn**
— just not on the same day —
or in the same way.

George Evans

Not From Valleyview?

Here is how to make a difference in the world, by creating your own presentation for your school.

1. Work with, or search for information about children with disabilities.	6. Explain the steps that you think the children can take to help their experience.
2. Create a slide about yourself, and a brief summary of your experience and research.	7. Include suggestions on how they can pursue their interests and make friends.
3. Explain the types of disabilities in special needs children.	8. Add how parents, staff, administrators, peers, etc. can help disabled children.
4. Include the struggles that children with disabilities have, in school and in life.	9. Include plenty of pictures and examples to captivate everyone, and keep them engaged in the presentation.
5. Create scenarios that capture how people who have disabilities feel.	10. Finish with a positive message to summarize the theme of your presentation.