Social Benefits of Recess for Students with Nonverbal Learning Disabilities

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Introduction

What are the chances that a classroom teacher will teach a student with nonverbal learning disabilities (NVLD) in his/her career? What modifications are made for these students in and out of the classroom? Does this affect their ability to interact in less-structured environments such as recess? In this manuscript the authors define and describe common characteristics (signs, symptoms, and prevalence) of children with NVLD, note the benefits of recess, including social benefits and note modifications that can be made for students with nonverbal learning disorders in recess.

Definition, Signs, Symptoms and Prevalence of NVLD

Nonverbal Learning Disorder is defined by Psychology Today (2017) as a “neurological condition marked by a collection of academic—and sometimes social—difficulties experienced by children of average or superior intelligence” (p.1). Students with the disorder often face difficulties in terms of inter-personal relationships, problem solving, organizing thoughts, and identifying concepts and patterns. Basically, it is often challenging for individuals with NVLD to identify concepts or patterns and apply them to new situations (Miller, 2020). The title of the condition seems a little confusingas children with NVLD are typically very verbal. Students may not even experience academic difficulty until they reach grades later in elementary school (Patino, 2019).

Nonverbal Learning Disorder often displays characteristics similar to low-spectrum autism in terms of symptoms such as difficulty with social skills and poor abstract thinking skills. The characteristic that often differentiates between the two is the severity of symptoms. Nonverbal Learning Disorder often displays less severe symptoms. The following is a full list of the signs of NVLD as presented by University of Michigan Medicine (University of Michigan Health System, 2020):

* Great vocabulary and verbal expression
* Excellent memory skills
* Attention to detail, but misses the big picture
* Trouble *understanding* reading
* Difficulty with math, especially word problems
* Poor abstract reasoning
* Physically awkward; poor coordination
* Messy and laborious handwriting
* Concrete thinking; taking things very literally
* Trouble with nonverbal communication, like body language, facial expression and tone of voice
* Poor social skills; difficulty making and keeping friends
* Fear of new situations
* Trouble adjusting to changes
* May be very naive and lack common sense
* Anxiety, depression, low self-esteem
* May withdraw, becoming *agoraphobic* (abnormal fear of open spaces) (p.1)

Other signs include a lack of understanding of personal space or difficulty focusing. If a student has NVLD and a teacher or adult is not aware, the child could be incorrectly be perceived as defiant or inattentive (Patino, 2019).

The prognosis for individuals who have NVLD is typically very good as long as the proper support is provided. There is no specific treatment for NVLD, but intervention starting as soon as possible is most beneficial. Once someone is diagnosed with NVLD, school professionals can set both a social and academic accommodation plan in place in order to help the student in any way possible. At-home practices can also be implemented in order to help the child become more comfortable at school and around their peers *(Frye, 2017).*

In terms of prevalence of NVLD in the United States, it is estimated that about 1% of the population has NVLD. However, the diagnosis rate of NVLD has been increasing over the last 10-15 years. This is due to the advancement of technology and increasing survival rates of premature babies, who are at a higher risk of being neurologically compromised. Furthermore, NVLD has shown to be prevalent in the same number of both males and females (NonVerbal Learning Disorder, 2012). Noting these statistics, one percent may seem like a small number of students, but if elementary school class-sizes are 20-25, one out of every four or five classes would probably include a child with NVLD.

Social Benefits of Recess for Students with NVLD

Recess serves as an integral break in the day for both teachers and students. Simply stated, the benefits of the recess setting are high for all children. These benefits can be physical, cognitive, and social. In terms of social benefits, the proper organization of recess, including well-organized inclusion of children with disabilities, can potentially lead to the following:

* Developing a sense of belonging and become better prepared for life in the community as children and adults
* Developing an individual’s strengths and gifts
* Allowing children to work on individual goals while being with other students their own age
* Fostering a culture of respect and belonging. It also provides the opportunity to learn about and accept individual differences for all children
* Providing all children with opportunities to develop friendships with one another. Friendships provide role models and opportunities for growth (New Brunswick Association for Community Living, 2017).

For individuals with NVLD, recess gives an opportunity to interact and play with peers in a loosely-structured, essentially free environment. As individuals struggle with communication and social skills, recess allows students to play in an environment where social skills can be practiced. Although recess is a less-structured environment, intervention by the teacher is still very important in many aspects including the implementation of modifications.

Recess Modifications for Students with NVLD

Students with NVLD tend to be most successful in school when the needs of the children are understood and taken into consideration by all faculty members of the school. Students with NVLD will face a series of challenges in public school. The following represents many of the NLD characteristics noted previously, and possible modifications that can be used to address them in the recess setting. It should also be remembered that the best set-up for recess is to provide a variety of activities such as individual activities and small group games. Providing multiple activities and suggesting a variety of activities during a recess period is important because the attention spans of children are usually not very long.

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| Characteristics of NLD | Recess Modifications for Each of Characteristic of NLD |
| Concrete thinking; taking things very literally | * In a one-on-one setting, preferably before class, discuss and state specific options for participation in recess activities with the student * Give the student pictures of children performing the possible recess activities that are available in a one-on-one setting * After explaining an activity, have the student repeat a basic description of the activity |
| Trouble with nonverbal communication, like body language, facial expression and tone of voice | * Give direct verbal instructions to the student * Give the student pictures of children performing the possible recess activities that are available in a one-on-one setting * Use a calm, consistent voice when giving directions, giving feedback, and when involved in behavior management |
| Poor social skills; difficulty making and keeping friends | * Participate as a teacher in a small group activity with a group of students, hopefully including the student with a NLD, and demonstrate appropriate social skills. Remove yourself after the student seems comfortable * Have students participate in small group games during part of recess. Supervise the groups and switch group members periodically. Also, make sure that a student with poor social skills is not grouped with the student with NLD |
| Fear of new situations | * Tell the student on a one-on-one basis about the transition to recess, a few minutes before recess begins * Make sure that many of the same activities are available each day * Discuss with the student the activities that available on each day |
| Trouble adjusting to changes | * Do not allow students to play games in which participants are eliminated * Use the same routine before and after recess. After recess allow the students a calm activity such as writing about recess or for younger children, drawing about their “recess experience” * Make sure that many of the same activities are available each day |
| May be very naive and lack common sense | * As a teacher, maintain constant supervision of the student * Before moving on to a different activity, always be proactive and ask the student about which activity they are going to participate in next |
| Anxiety, depression, low self-esteem | * Have students participate in activities where they can adjust possible challenging activities. Set-up activities with a variety of difficulties. * Ensure that competitive and non-competitive activities are available |
| May withdraw, becoming *agoraphobic* (abnormal fear of open spaces) | * If participating on a blacktop or a playground, identify specifically the area for participation * Assign a different peer daily to participate in the activities with the student after a few days |
| Other signs include a lack of understanding of personal space or difficulty focusing. | * Remember to have the student change a portion of the activity or the complete activity in which he/she is participating * Remind the student to stay in their bubble |

After recess, periodically ask the student, in simpler terminology, how they “did” during

recess. Simple questions like the following may be asked.

1. What did you [the student] “do” at recess?
2. Did you participate with any other students? What did you do together? Did you enjoy doing this? Why or why not?
3. Did you feel comfortable during the recess? Did any thing bother you during the time?
4. What would you change the next time you have recess?

For younger children, or students that could not answer the questions above, modifying the students’ questions and instead asking children to do draw a picture of what they did at recess and include any children in the picture that participated with them would allow you to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of the children during recess. A verbal explanation by the teacher could also be used.

Conclusion

The participation of a student with NLD in recess can often be both challenging and rewarding for the student and teacher. The rewards can manifest themselves in the ability of the teacher to use simple methods to improve the ability of the student to practice social skills. The methods noted in this paper have hopefully addressed some basic concerns and solutions to improve the inclusive recess setting of students with NLD and hopefully improve the social skills of the student.

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