

CAN DO ELLA!

Joyce Richardson

All children need space and time to develop their abilities. Teachers must work alongside the child, listen to them and follow the child's lead. This requires patience and a consistent approach, allowing the child to develop a trusting relationship so that learning can take place. However, if you are deafblind and have lost your distance senses, you need even more for teachers – and others – to have these qualities. This article shares the experiences of Ella – a 12-year-old girl who is deafblind – and how her family, teachers and coaches (Team Ella) have learned to adapt their delivery to ensure she has a positive experience of physical education (PE) and physical activity.

Ella is fortunate to have expert teachers in her life who have been encouraged by Ella's mother to work with her. She was determined that a deafblind child should have the same access to PE that her siblings have. The teachers were asked to report on the success of their work with Ella and they all say they have learned so much from working with her. She has progressed – physically, mentally and emotionally – in leaps and bounds through their persistent and consistent efforts to give her the time to assimilate physical activities. Above all, they have been willing to work with Ella and her family to find what works for her. For example, Ella is non-verbal, although she is experimenting with words and trying out speech. As her grandmother, I noticed that if I sang an instruction or request or gave information to the tune of *Here we go round the mulberry bush*, she could process this and respond. Now, even though Ella is 12, all of her team use this strategy at times of stress or to help Ella process information if she seems to have difficulty in understanding. This is just one example of how the child, family and teachers can find and share solutions.

The following reports from three of Ella's teachers show how they have adopted this positive approach and made such an amazing contribution to her life.

WE SHARE, WE DANCE – EMMA HARDMAN

I started working with Ella in 2016. I spent a good few months at the beginning being tested by her. She had questions: Would I ask her to do things she didn't like? Were we compatible to work one-to-one? Did I listen enough to what she needed? Could she trust me? Listening is something which I think I'm reasonably good at through bringing up three children of my own and working with young children and older people in dance. Across the board, every day we listen, but what are we listening for and what are we hearing? As a girl whose hearing and sight are affected, whose body sometimes doesn't do what she wants, Ella has learnt to listen in a completely different way to how you or I might listen. By listening to what we feel, listening to the energy projected from the person of contact, listening to tone and movements, and being astutely aware of every moment, Ella has taught me a lot about listening and how much I hear.

After spending some months with Ella, working once a week in her home, we moved to a hall as she was desperate to move beyond what she could in a normal room. As we worked, Ella built trust in me; I was her safety net. I would allow her to move whichever way she wanted by moving with her, going around her, under her, running with her, rolling with her and spinning with her. We would drum on the wooden floor to let each other know the space we were in and our communication was, as I see it, on the highest level: we had no use for words. Our movement journey is a very successful blend of listening, working without fear, improvisation and rhythm – all vital to any human being.

As a dancer, I was told many times that rhythm comes from the heartbeat, a breath, a pulse. Ella and my weekly pulse differ each time we meet. Ella has a brilliant sense of rhythm and fantastic body memory. She remembers body movements we've done weeks ago and, when I've forgotten, often reminds my body of what they were. We

share our movements; we are equal in our thoughtful dancing/moving space; in each fleeting moment we are one. This movement work is based on contact improvisation, skills which I developed from my dance experience, but with Ella our classes are more in-depth, with storytelling to express feelings and experiences.

Ella and I continue our journey each week, developing more contact, and sometimes more, sometimes less movement. The emotional and physical benefits of this development include auditory stimulation and response, repetition, touch sensory work, relationship-building, embodiment of learning and self-expression. Having a safe space to express and guide and be guided is a very positive experience, for us both. And we continue our dance into the unknown future.

FOREST-BASED LEARNING – SARAH HUNTER

I am a forest-based learning lead practitioner and I work at a primary school where I lead weekly sessions. The children are encouraged to explore and participate in games, activities and new experiences and they learn how to assess risks as they take part. Whilst they are observing and caring for the world, using natural resources and making connections, they are developing strength, a positive attitude to learning, perseverance and practical skills.

When I was approached to work with Ella, I was surprised to hear that outdoor learning sessions for deafblind children were few and far between. So, I agreed to give it a go. The process of getting started took some time and involved meeting the team, discussing our ideas, sharing our professional and personal knowledge and agreeing how we would start.

Our first priority was to assess the proposed site for dangers we would look for on an average day, but then consider how a deafblind child would traverse

and experience this site. The answer was cautiously and with a great deal of anxiety. So, before even meeting Ella, we began by walking the site with one of us blindfolded with an intervener on either side. We considered the contours of the site and what would be a manageable walking distance, as co-ordination and balance also needed to be factored. We use a sensory garden which sits inside the school grounds, accessed through a metal gate, and which slopes to the field and ends at a wooden stage and large reading chair. The second part travels through stony, uneven terrain, past workstations, trees and musical instruments, before continuing in a circular route back to the car. The end points and circular route are extremely beneficial as rest points and lead the session back to the vehicle, signalling home-time. The team know that mind-mapping is the best way forward, so we use the same points to stop at, name and touch every session, enabling Ella to build a familiar map of where she is and what's next, relieving some anxiety.

Our second priority was to build the relationship between Ella and myself. We only meet at the site so the connection between me and our sessions is formed. I wear an identifier every session. I chose a wood cookie, made from a slice of branch, which I wear around my wrist. I used this as an icebreaker as I could explain it was from a tree and that we learn outside. I wear this each time we meet. The team explain they are coming to see me, and I hold hands with Ella as I greet her and allow the wood cookie to be felt and sometimes tasted. I maintain hand contact throughout the session and, now we have begun to build a rapport, I feel confident enough to soothe and rub her hand alongside the interveners.

We've only had four sessions so far, but I've already had the privilege of taking the place of one of the interveners and walking with Ella from the stage to the car, where we say goodbye and see you next week. I felt this was a big step of trust and it will also enable us to add new experiences into our future sessions, using the objects and outdoor environment.

The stop, name and touch points have allowed Ella to use her heightened sense of touch to experience hard, cold, textured and, during extreme weathers, wet and warm materials. We continue to name, describe and often sing about objects, leaving points in the song for her to join in, to encourage her to use her words, whilst encouraging taking pleasure in touching, smelling, banging and achieving. It makes it fun for all of us and this sense of shared experience has built good relationships between Ella, the team and me.

So, looking to the future, it will be a slow road, but that's okay as we are all learning together. We hope to introduce connection boxes, using objects that relate to each other and the natural world. Imagine opening a box to touch a seed, rub a plant, smell a freshly cut lemon and taste a slice of lemon cake. We also hope to build on Ella's existing skills, such as sensory exploration in different weathers using natural and malleable materials and craft and construction. This will further make sense of why we should be outside. We've even considered how amazing autumn will be, sitting on a log, wrapped up, surrounded by the smell and heat of an open fire, roasting and tasting marshmallows. These might seem like big dreams, and some time away, but the most important part is maintaining trust, keeping Ella engaged, and responding to her needs and wants. Our time together is about being equals and enjoying the moment and each and every experience.

ENTERPRISING EXERCISES – HESUS KIDD

As a gym owner, it is my belief that no one's circumstance should limit them from the opportunity to participate in some sort of fitness. Fundamentally, exercise provides physical benefits but, more importantly in my view, it also provides a huge mental benefit. What is good for the body is even better for the mind.

I first met Ella nearly 11 months ago when I was approached by the 'Can Do Ella' team to see if it was possible to introduce some sort of exercise routine for her. When I was briefed on the 'physical limitations', I initially thought it was above my head and would really test my belief that opportunity should be given to all. However, I agreed to try my best as it was a new situation for me.

Building a relationship with anyone requires trust and Ella is no different. For the first few weeks I sat in the footwell or adjacent seat of the car just talking to her and letting her get used to my presence, voice and identifiers (my wrist bands). This progressed to her venturing into the gym reception to use the toilet. Shortly after, she ventured onto the gym floor where we would sit on the turf. This was the first big step as she had to map out the route, feeling where the doors, shelves, bag storage units and mats are. If she sits on the matting, she knows she is not where she needs to be and feels for the texture of the grass.

Our sessions in the gym started by sitting on the turf with more trust-building, for

example by me handing her a resistance band or ball for her to feel and get used to. Ella loves to throw things and, because she cannot see where the object will go, we got her to throw a lacrosse ball in the direction of the metal shutters. When it hits them, it bangs so she knows she has hit the target, even without being able to see it. The sound is enough to give her the feedback to do this again and again, proving co-ordination and accuracy (two of the ten elements of fitness) can be achieved even without sight. We progressed to Ella being able to use two balls – one each in her left and right hands – thrown at the same time. From there, we introduced a larger ball (football-size), which requires a two-handed throw. The next exercise involves a rope which is one and half inches thick and 30 feet long, weighing 15-20kgs. Ella can use both hands to pull this from end to end three or four times. She gets great pleasure once she reaches the end each time and this is cause for a big laugh and clap to celebrate.

Both of these exercises require a lot of mental and physical strength to co-ordinate a successful outcome, which Ella is now more than capable of. We have since progressed to getting her to squat (sit up and down) on a box then walk up and down the turf. She is assisted by her interveners but, more recently, Ella has allowed me to walk her from the car into the gym. This has progressed to letting me guide her up and down the turf as we get her to move a bit more throughout the gym.

Ella is a shining example that anyone who is given the opportunity to participate in any activity can achieve success regardless of any labels or 'limitations' that are associated with them. It may take more time but the effort that goes in and the outcomes achieved are the same, regardless of the journey time. I have learnt so much in my time spent with Ella and the team and every week is proof of how working together can achieve great success. Our expectations of what we can achieve regarding Ella's physical capabilities are rising week on week as we all continue to learn. It will take time, but I feel strongly that she is capable of doing everything that a young adult with no physical limitations can do.

Ella and her team would like to thank these teachers for their fantastic contribution to her life. ■

Joyce Richardson is a former physical education teacher and is Ella's grandmother.