

Can You Take Young People With Additional Needs On Overseas Mission?

by Mark Arnold, Additional Needs Ministry Director, Urban Saints

Going on an overseas mission trip can often be a transforming and life changing experience; offering an opportunity to serve in a very different culture and environment, challenging our worldview and our perceptions of our role in the world. Taking young people on a short-term mission trip experience can equip them and inspire them for a lifetime of service, or at the very least cause them to think critically about the consumerist 'it's all about me' culture that we live in.

But why should transforming overseas mission experiences like this be only for so-called 'mainstream' young people? Why shouldn't everyone, including young people with additional needs or disabilities, be able to experience trips like this too? So often, young people with additional needs are excluded from overseas mission trips like this unless they are accompanied by a parent or carer, but is that the only way that all young people can be included?

I recently had the great privilege of taking a group of young people on a 10-day short-term mission trip to South Africa. 12 of us, including 10 young people, a female leader, and myself, joined with groups from across the UK totalling 120 together to build homes and hope for disadvantaged families in a township, work with the local children through a kids club, and to see the young people blossom, grow, and be transformed by the experience. Included in the group was an autistic young person for whom this was their first experience of being overseas away from their family. What sharing this journey with this young person taught me is that anyone can go on a short-term overseas mission trip, and that doing so can be a really valuable and inspiring step in the development of a young person with additional needs, just as much as it can be for anyone else.

There are many ways that a young person with additional needs can be supported to participate in a short-term overseas mission trip. My journey with Timmy* has helped me to understand these better and so I share some of these learnings with you as I 'think out loud' about this for the future:

1. Planning and preparation

It is important to know as much as possible about a young person with additional needs before the trip starts. What are the things that they are likely to find difficult? What triggers might there be that can lead to them struggling to cope? What support can be put in place to minimise these potential flash points and what strategies might we need to have up our sleeves to help the young person if they become overwhelmed or anxious for example.

Good, open conversations with the young person themselves, and the adults that care for them at home, can help us to create a profile of the young person, their needs, and how to support them, long before we travel.

2. Daily/weekly schedule

Right from the beginning of the trip, it was important to provide information about the schedule for the next few hours, the day, the rest of the week. What is happening now, what is next, what is later. By breaking the trip down into bite-sized chunks it was much easier to provide the support needed for each stage of the trip. It also helped the young person to be able to focus on the next thing, rather than being overwhelmed by thinking about everything in one go. A learning for next time will be to provide some better resources to aid this, including a day-by-day timetable with photo's (and possibly symbols if required) to give to the young person. Having this information clearly displayed in the accommodation and at the work site will also help. We were in Africa, so scheduling and timings were a little fluid, but some key points in the day remained fairly fixed and provided a base for the rest of the programme.

3. Providing a 'safe space'

At the accommodation (based on a converted farm), the young people could get away from it all for a bit by going to their dormitory, and there were plenty of other quiet safe spaces that they could access if the dormitory was busy and noisy. At the work site, we identified a quieter safe space that could be accessed as required. It enabled the young person to be able to get some calm time away from the noise and hubbub of the work site when they needed it.

4. Identifying specific roles/jobs

Not all of the tasks on the work site were ideally suited to a young person with additional needs, so it was important to identify some specific jobs that were within their ability, while still stretching them a little with new things to do. Sometimes the young person was able to get involved in the tasks the other young people were doing, like applying a cement plaster/stucco to the walls of the house, working alongside their peers; sometimes the young person needed an individual job that they could do at their own pace such as a litter pick around the site, or cleaning the tools. New skills were developed, a good contribution was made to the project, while not overloading the young person.

5. Regular check-ins

Making sure that we regularly checked in with the young person, several times a day at key moments, ensured that any issues were caught early. Trust developed through the building of relationship which enabled the young person to discuss how they were feeling when things were tough, allowing us to provide better support. Listening was really important, making sure that the young person had the time to say how they were really doing; even making eye contact across a room, with a little nod meaning "I'm OK", was important. As a result, although the first few days of the 10-day trip were sometimes difficult, the rest of the trip saw the young person flourish and do really well.

6. Buddies

Ensuring that the young person had another young person, a friend, with them in their dormitory that could help them, check that they were OK, help find things that they had mislaid, remind them when it was time to get up, go to meals etc. was invaluable. Having a 'buddy' nearby also provided us as leaders with an early warning system if anything wasn't going well.

7. Flexibility

Sometimes there needed to be some flexibility to any rules or guidelines that were in place. For example, while we generally discouraged the young people taking technology to the worksite e.g. iPods, mobile phones etc. we realised that for some young people with additional needs being able to shut out external noise by listening to some music and/or using ear defenders was essential. As a result of this understanding of the needs of some young people, we were able to provide some flexibility to these guidelines and support the young people much better.

8. Celebration

Throughout the trip, there were opportunities to celebrate the progress the young person had made. It might have been little things like successfully completing a task, or bigger things like contributing something that had helped the whole group. Celebrating a successful day, the end of the project, or the trip as a whole all help build the young person's self-worth and confidence, which helped give them positive experiences to look back on when things were harder.

9. Prayer

It was important never to underestimate the power of prayer. Taking a young person with additional needs on a mission trip totally outside of their comfort zone, to the other side of the planet, needed strong prayer support. Having a team of people praying throughout the trip was essential to its success, and knowing that we could send some specific prayer points for immediate support made all the difference.

10. Post-trip review

Mission trip experiences don't stop the moment we get home; the memories, the physical impact of all the hard work and lack of sleep, the emotions of working in often difficult environments, all continue on for a while. It is important to check-in with the young people to see how they are doing, are they experiencing any difficulties associated with reverse culture shock, and to provide some support as appropriate. This is particularly necessary for any young people with additional needs who may struggle to regulate their feelings and emotions.

There are lots of other learnings from this short-term mission trip to South Africa; things that we will do better next time, things that will ensure that more young people can engage in a life-changing, transforming, experience like this whether they have additional needs or not. Of the many significant moments that the young person with additional needs we took on mission this year contributed to the trip, perhaps their greatest legacy will be the trail that has been blazed for others to follow.

"Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain..." Psalm 127:1a

Mark Arnold
26th July 2018

*Timmy is not his real name

Bible passage used in this blog post:

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