Outdoor Activities

Bartiméus:
Outdoor Activities

Outdoor activities for clients with deafblindness: that would be fun! Mountain climbing, canoeing, building huts, hiking... what’s not to like? Having fun together, exercising — out in nature.

For clients with deafblindness, this also appears to have a positive effect on their health and well-being, as research from 2005 shows (Gibson).

Perhaps not an adventure to enter into lightly. Allowing the client to participate in such an activity calls for preparation. You want to make sure that it is safe. And being able to communicate with the client about the activity and the experience is important, both in preparation, during the activity and afterwards. This publication is about that. To help you prepare and execute outdoor activities and to inspire you to go for it. Because there is nothing better than embarking on an adventure together!

Photo: A woman with deafblindness and her caregiver experiencing the mudflats at the Wadden Sea
Theory: Outdoor Activities

Most people enjoy the outdoors. Participating in outdoor activities, including sports activities, sounds especially adventurous. Doing things outdoors requires a certain degree of effort and may take you out of your comfort zone.

A clear definition of outdoor activities cannot be given, and appears to depend on a number of factors: fun, exercise, being outdoors and in nature. The interpretation differs per person and the level of intensity can be adjusted to suit the individual. Often, the activities involve a certain effort or have an element of—real or imagined—danger, but these are certainly not inherent characteristics! Things like climbing, boating and long hikes are included in what are considered outdoor activities.

For people with disabilities in general and those with deafblindness and an intellectual disability in particular, participating in such outdoor activities hardly seems an option. Any number of barriers and obstacles can be imagined, for this target group; those related to communication, safety, knowing what is about to happen, self-confidence and trusting the other person.

The element of time and the intensity of the activities could also be reasons to opt for other—more ‘regular’—activities, such as going out to dinner or to a subtropical swimming paradise.

Over the last years, experience has increasingly been gained in outdoor activities for people with deafblindness and intellectual disabilities, and has shown that the activities can be lots of fun for both the people with deafblindness and their caregivers!

Joe Gibson (2000) went mountain climbing in Scotland with someone with deafblindness. In Norway, Kari Scholl Brede (2013) went felling trees with two youngsters with congenital deafblindness, under the guidance of professional lumberjacks. The youngsters were also shown how to saw those trees into planks and subsequently use them to build a hut. At Bartiméus, we built a hut, went mudflat hiking and camping, we took a closer look at farm life, walked along a path of sound installations and have been on an outdoor vacation. Experiences that left a positive mark and on which we look back with joy (Worm, 2015). Even the more intense outdoor activities are definitely among the possibilities, also for people with serious disabilities and/or deafblindness.
Outdoor Activities

Effects of Outdoor Activities

Participating in outdoor activities is not just any old pursuit of leisure. Dr Joe Gibson studied the effects of outdoor education on the lives of those with deafblindness (Gibson, 2005). He concluded that an outdoor education may yield meaningful experiences.

By participating in such activities, various skills are being trained, which led to improvements in:

- sleeping
- general physical condition
- physical mobility
- the occurrence of self-injurious behaviour

In addition, there were opportunities for personal and social development, such as:

- self-confidence
- awareness of one’s surroundings
- concentration level
- patience
- relationships with others

Although outdoor activities, in first instance, are intended to be fun, there are also a number of positive effects on physical and mental health. In the United Kingdom, outdoor weeks are being held for schoolchildren, in support of their personal and social development, from the assumption that the positive impact will linger if and when the educational programme continues to pay attention to these physical activities (Scrutton, 2015).

Research conducted among the elderly also shows that physical activity in combination with social activity helps to slow down or even reduce cognitive deterioration (for a brief overview, see Scherder, 2002). In addition to the research by Gibson and that by Scholl-Brede, there are no other known studies into the effect of outdoor activities on people with deafblindness. There is, however, growing practical experience at Bartiméus and Kentalis, among others.
Structure of an Outdoor Activity

To ensure the full benefits of outdoor activities, it is important to distinguish three elements (Gibson, 2005; see figure on the right).

1) the nature of the activities and the natural environment (what you will be doing, how to go about it, and where you will be doing it)
2) the stimulating effect of the activities (are they in line with the personal interests of the subject and do they have the appropriate level of intensity?)
3) the relationships between people during the activities (how activities are done together, how experiences can be shared during the activities)

After having done the activities together, you can talk about it in the broadest sense of the word, recalling them and learning from them. Experiences can also be shared with others, tangible memories (materials collected during an activity) can be used when recalling the experience. Video analysis may be used to improve the suitability of the activity for the person with deafblindness.

All together, this may improve the client’s communication skills.

Schematic 1: Description of how Outdoor Education may improve the development of communication (Gibson & Nicholas, 2017).
Feasibility

The feasibility of outdoor activities is of course highly related to time. There must be time to prepare, preferably together with the client, and to execute the activity. However, also other factors are playing a role. It is important for caregivers to be enthusiastic and motivated to invest their energy in this, and for them to be supported by colleagues, family members and the organisation (i.e. behavioural experts and the Bartiméus Expertise Centre Deafblindness). Such collaborations can be the initiation of creative thinking and investigation into how outdoor activities could be implemented further. Collaboration may also work as an incentive — to not forget about outdoor activities, among the hustle and bustle of everyday care. These activities can be as major or minor as desired.

Mudflat hiking is something special, of course, but in your own immediate surroundings, even your back garden, outdoor activities can be imagined. Examples include building a natural structure, taking a mud bath in the rain, or outdoor crafts using autumn leaves.

Evaluation of the 2015–2016 outdoor activities has indicated the following factors of success: time, collaboration, support and financial means.

The success factors of the execution of the activities are: thinking large & starting small, preparation, communication, and above all enthusiasm. We saw how people can drive themselves to great achievements. Or, in Joe Gibson’s words, ‘The nature is outside your window every day and there are many ways to enjoy and use the nature. Only your imagination is the limit!’
Format for the preparation and execution of the activity

On bartimeus.nl/outdoor you find two formats that may help set up outdoor activities. Using the formats will provide you with a list of things that need to happen for the activity to be successful and will show you the set-up.

The first format, ‘outdoor activity’, provides an outline of what you are planning to do, what the preconditions would be, and how the activity could be set up and completed. The second format, ‘sub-activity’, provides more details about what you will be doing and how to ensure that it becomes a joint activity, involving the client as much as possible. Both formats only serve in preparation for the actual event.

Activities share one thing of paramount importance: enjoyment! This is the main ingredient for sharing an experience that you can talk about together and with others to relive the fun.

In addition to the blank formats, there are also a few that are already filled in—providing examples and inspiration. We would really like to receive your own reports (anonymised), so we can share them. In that way, we hope to create a growing library of fine examples. These examples may yield new creative ideas.

If you have questions, would like to discuss things with us, or are looking for other examples, please contact us at expertisecentrum-doofblindheid@bartimeus.nl.

For more information / contact

Would you like to know more with respect to the information provided above, or do you have any questions? Would you like to know more about doing outdoor activities with clients afflicted by deafblindness? Or would you like to exchange ideas and experiences with others? Please contact the members of the Bartiméus Expertise Centre Deafblindness.

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References


Go to bartimeus.nl/outdoor for information and formats