

How Challengers Challenged Me

When I was a mere nine years old, I expressed a big interest in working at Disability Challengers (more commonly known as Challengers). Over the summer, I made that dream come true. I spent two and a half weeks volunteering at Guildford Play Scheme and had an amazing time there.

The charity, through its multiple schemes, provides daycare and activities for both disabled and non-disabled children and young people from the ages of 2-25¹. Challengers is very close to my heart because my older brother, Victor, who has severe autism, has been attending their schemes ever since my family moved here from the US in 2010. Challengers has provided us with care for Victor, allowing him to partake in enjoyable activities on weekends and providing respite for my parents. The charity aims to provide inclusive fun for all children and young people. They have a no-exclusion policy, promising to never turn away a child or young person due to the severity of their disability or complexity of the care they require. Personally, I think this is what sets Challengers apart from other organisations; parents can be free of worry as their children will be looked after by thoroughly trained staff. Challengers also takes on many non-disabled children and young people to increase inclusion. In fact, I used to attend myself! My mother would send Victor, me and my two (also neurotypical²) younger siblings to Challengers together. I have fond memories of the time I spent there; I always enjoyed hanging around Victor and his 1:1³. That was when I realised that I wanted to work at Challengers - I was in the soft play area of the scheme that I now work at, sitting next to my brother and his 1:1, Laura, who is now my colleague.



Victor and me

My family has been greatly impacted by Challengers' work; they can always be trusted to take good care of my brother. Victor's autism has profoundly affected my family - we have all had to adjust our way of life to accommodate him. He requires someone to be with him pretty much all the time (1:1 support) because he needs help with most aspects of everyday life. He is non-verbal⁴ and can't express his needs in any other way. We tried sign language with him when he was younger, however he lacks basic understanding of and skills associated with communication. At Challengers, Victor will always have the 1:1 support that he needs. There will be a worker allocated to look after him for the morning, and another for the afternoon. At Challengers, parents fill out an information sheet for their child. As workers, we read these before the children arrive. Information such as dietary requirements, likes and dislikes, toileting needs and the nature of the child's impairments are specified in these, so that we may take care of each child to the best of our abilities.

Volunteering for Challengers took a lot of planning. I applied through their website in February and later attended a recruitment event. I was not only interviewed - I also had to explain how I would handle certain scenarios, such as dealing with a child who posed a risk to other children. After my holiday volunteer role

¹ Pre-school: ages 2-5 / Play: ages 4-12 / Youth: ages 13-18 / Young Adult: ages 18-25

² not displaying autistic (or other neurologically atypical) characteristics of thought or behaviour.

³ (*pronounced "one-to-one"*); support where one disabled person is supervised by, and has the full attention of, one carer.

⁴ unable to speak or make conversation.

was confirmed, I planned how I would get myself to central Guildford and back each day. I would take the bus to Guildford College, then walk for 25 minutes from the bus stop to the scheme. In total, the commute each way would be about 45 minutes. Before I started, I also had to undertake a lot of training. I completed courses for recognising signs of abuse, food and allergy awareness, epilepsy awareness and helping children to regulate emotions, to name a few. I can now happily tell you the differences between absence, tonic, clonic and tonic-clonic seizures! This training was mandatory regardless of whether you were a paid worker or volunteer, which I thought was excellent. I could not begin working until I was fully equipped with the skills that I needed. Also, Challengers puts on additional training and refresher sessions every term for those who need a recap or would like to enhance their abilities.

Each day at Challengers was far from boring. We began the day at 9:00am with a briefing in the staff room. The Leaders (those in charge of the scheme) would first explain the day's theme and activities. Then, they would give us our pairings (tell us who our 1:1s were) and inform us of any allergies, dietary requirements and other medical needs. We would get the information sheet of the child we were allocated and read it. It was very common to have a different child each day, so there was a lot to remember! We would then go and "set up" - prepare the different areas for the children. This included getting out toys, taking scooters and tricycles out of the shed, emptying the dishwasher and making the space look inviting. The scheme that I worked at (Guildford Play) had very good facilities such as a kitchen, an art room, a fantastic playground, a soft play area and a sensory room. What is a sensory room, you ask? It is a quiet room with coloured lights, bubble pillars, beanbags and often music playing softly (the children loved it when there were Disney songs). The children arrived at 10:00am and we would meet our 1:1s by the door. We had a staggered lunch schedule (so that there were always enough staff with the children) and read our information sheets for the afternoon during our lunch break. Then, we would go back to the play floor and find our new 1:1. After the children left at 4:00pm, we would "set down". We tidied up toys, cleaned all the surfaces and mopped the floors until the place was ready for the next morning. We had a de-brief at around 4:40pm, where we were able to report back to the Leaders on how popular the activities were, as well as how individual children's days went. We would be finished at around 5:00pm. Although the days were very tiring, it was fulfilling knowing that parents like mine were able to have a break because of the work we did.



me and Ariella. She suffers from epilepsy, hence the stopwatch around my neck to time her seizures.

I think a major part of why I love working there is how varied each day is. You never know who you will meet. Children with a huge range of disabilities attend; from Down's syndrome to blindness, cerebral palsy to autism, epilepsy to undiagnosed genetic disorders, each day is different and exciting. Part of the reason why I was so keen to work at Challengers was my desire to broaden my knowledge and understanding of disabilities. Of course I am something of a specialist in severe autism, but I wanted to expand on what I knew and use the skills I have developed to help others. I have been involved in Victor's learning since I was two years old, and continue to encourage him in his development. I prompt him when needed, try to refine the sounds in the few words he can say (examples include "Hi", "ice cream" and "biscuit") and help him to become more independent. Challengers has really opened my eyes to the huge number of disabilities affecting children and I am so grateful for that.

Overall, working at Challengers has been such a wonderful experience. I love working there so much that it will remain my holiday job - I even worked a few days this half term! I will not be eligible for payment until I turn 16, so for the moment I will continue as a volunteer. I was recently delighted to receive a “Silver Volunteer Certificate” for volunteering over 50 hours in the summer - I hope to get a “Gold Certificate” before I change to being a paid worker! Challengers has definitely helped me develop skills such as patience, communication and working as a team. I think that these will be incredibly useful for when I have other jobs in the future. I also think that working at Challengers has helped me to mature and grow as a person, and to be more responsible. I feel that my contribution to the charity is meaningful, because spaces available for the



children depends on the number of staff working on a particular day. I believe that coming to work gives one more family some respite and an opportunity to rest - many of these children have very complex needs (such as being gastro-fed, being in a wheelchair, or needing near-constant 1:1, like Victor). When I work there, I feel as though I’m giving back to Challengers for all the care they have provided for me and my family over the years. Victor continues to attend Challengers Youth, and will move on to Challengers Young Adult when he turns 19. These schemes will help us to look towards the future as he gets older. I think that Challengers would really benefit from the

donation on offer. At the moment they are limited to south-east England; this money could aid them in their plans to expand and create a “new hub” to help more families who need their services. They could also use this donation to improve their outings, giving disabled children access to the local community. This would encourage societal inclusion of these children, rather than them always staying in the centre. Personally, I think that this is vital if our culture is to continue evolving; these children must be more involved in their local communities and people must understand more about them. I think that this, above all else, is why Challengers needs and deserves the generous



donation on offer from our school.

Challengers' total income breakdown

This **Silver Award** is awarded to **Aurora Ceccato**

for volunteering more than 50 hours to help us enable vital play and leisure for disabled and non-disabled children at Challengers. You have made a huge difference to the lives of so many families across Surrey and the South East, so we'd just like to say...THANK YOU!

Number of volunteer hours:

61.5 hours

Bibliography

Challengers Impact Report 2019
www.disability-challengers.org