MORE THAN WORDS: CREATING OUTDOOR ADVENTURE OPPORTUNITIES FOR NONSPEAKING YOUNG PEOPLE

KATE PARR

Photos supplied by First Step Outdoors and Emily Chalk Photographer

I had just finished sending another participant down our 'forest abseil' and was drawn toward the climbing wall below where there seemed to be a lot of excitement and cheering.

As I walked closer, I saw Dion and his dad Harry climbing together. His mum Ally stood a little way back, and as I reached her we both started grinning and high-fiving like crazy.

There are moments in life when you suddenly realise you are witnessing something genuinely important — moments where you need to step outside yourself and properly take in what is happening.

This was one of those moments.

In April this year we hosted our second Spelling to Communicate (S2C) Camp at Pirongia Forest Park Lodge. The camp brought together families from around New Zealand and Australia, supporting nonspeaking autistic young people to participate in outdoor adventure activities in an environment where they were genuinely understood, respected, and included.

For those of us working in outdoor education, the experience challenged our assumptions, stretched our coaching approaches, and reminded us that inclusion is not about lowering expectations – it is about removing barriers.

Understanding "nonspeaking"

The young people attending the camp prefer the term "nonspeaking" rather than "non-verbal." The latin meaning for 'non verbal' translates to 'without words', as this isn't usually the case, it's not that appropriate for describing people!

Many of the participants navigate autism, dyspraxia, and other developmental differences. They communicate through a CRP (Communication Regulation Partner), using a letterboard or a keyboard to spell out what they want to say.

One of the most important concepts within S2C is "presuming competence." Rather than assuming inability because someone cannot reliably speak, the approach assumes the person understands far more than they may physically be able to express.

That mindset has made us ensure that we approach all of our groups with the same concept.

How the camp began

The idea for the camp really started with Dion. I have known Dion since he was six months old – thanks to the old Plunket coffee group days, he is now 19, and a couple of years ago we started climbing together.

The first time we climbed, I coached as I climbed up beside him.

"Lift your right leg."

"Grab that hold."

It quickly became apparent that Dion was not enjoying the constant talking. So I asked him how I could improve my coaching style.

His response?

"Shut up talking so much."

Fair enough! I was giving him too much information to process. I needed to simplify the instruction. So we developed what became known as "silent climbing." Instead of verbal instruction, I used taps and gestures to coach movement — tapping a leg to indicate lifting a foot, pointing to holds, or physically demonstrating actions. This gave Dion 'prompts' to follow which, over time, and if used repeatedly, helped create new neural pathways for motor movements.

The difference in Dion's ability to climb was immediate and, over time, those prompts were needed less and less as Dion began to master his climbing movements.

Another challenge we encountered was that Dion needed additional physical support to complete climbs successfully. We developed an assisted hoist system to help him climb while also adapting the setup to ensure system safety if he became dysregulated. (EG the use of maillons for attachments as they are harder to undo if grabbed).

The process involved constant problem solving and adaptation. It was a reminder that inclusion often requires creativity rather than perfection.

Turning a dream into reality

One of Dion's biggest goals was to create a camp where nonspeaking young people could meet others like themselves. He often spoke about feeling isolated and wanting genuine friendships with other nonspeakers.

Ally and I connected with Andrea Darroch, New Zealand's S2C practitioner, and together approached Sport NZ, who supported us to run the first camp in 2025. Seven nonspeaking young people attended alongside family members.

There was a huge amount to consider – accommodation, sensory needs, sleep challenges, quiet spaces, and participant safety. We quickly realised that traditional camp systems often do not adequately consider these needs. Despite the challenges, the camp was hugely successful, with Sport NZ creating a short case-study video highlighting the work being done.

This year we were unable to secure further funding, so we crowd-funded the camp ourselves through Givealittle.

Interest following the first camp spread internationally, and we welcomed two Australian families to join our 10 or so NZ participants and their families. It was also an opportunity to showcase S2C and the camp to its new members, so we had many additional nonspeakers and their families come along and see what was going on.

Over the course of the camp we ran climbing, ziplining, archery, and abseiling. For many families, opportunities like this simply do not exist.

One parent shared:

"There are simply no camps and almost no out-of-school activities that enable our non-speaking autistic children to participate. This spellers' camp was a fantastic opportunity for our young people to be provided with challenging activities pitched exactly to their unique abilities, while also experiencing a sense of community with peers that they do not get to experience anywhere else."

That feedback reinforced why we run this camp.

What the Nonspeakers told us

One of the most valuable parts of the camp was asking the nonspeakers directly what outdoor providers like us needed to understand. Their feedback was insightful, practical, and incredibly powerful.

Patrick, a nonspeaker from Australia, explained:

"If you coach my body using an action and a body part it helps me initiate, sequence and execute motor planning."

He also shared:

"Make me do all the activities. I look petrified but I am only nervous because of uncertainty as I haven't done the activity before."

Dion's reflections were equally powerful. When asked why these activities mattered so much, he responded:

"These (outdoor) activities are so important to everyone, you can't have one group left out because you perceive it to be too hard, they should be accessible to everyone, being able to access these activities is a human right for all, not just able bodied, and not just for those deemed to be independent."

When asked what made activities accessible for him as a nonspeaker, he wrote:

"I need people who understand how my body works. I need people who understand how my mind works. Once this is achieved, I can complete anything."

And when asked what he would tell other outdoor providers? (Prepare to be challenged):

"Sometimes people just need to believe in others, it is so easy to walk the other way, It is so easy to ignore someone who can't protest at the injustice we get handed, I would tell them to open their eyes to the possibility of what we could achieve if given the understanding and the support, they might just get the surprise of their lives as to how much we can achieve."

For all of us at First Step Outdoors, comments like these carry enormous weight.

Lessons for Outdoor Instructors

As outdoor educators we often pride ourselves on being adaptable and inclusive. But these camps highlighted just how heavily many of our programmes rely on verbal instruction, processing speed, and conventional communication. Working with nonspeaking participants challenged us to rethink many aspects of delivery.

Some of our biggest learnings included:

Pre-load information

Providing short videos, photos, or ‘social stories’ before activities helped participants understand what to expect and reduced anxiety. We are currently designing these with Dion, and plan on making them a resource to share.

Allow time and space

We scheduled quieter climbing sessions and ensured participants had extra time to process instructions and transitions. We checked in ‘on the boards’ (communicated on the letterboards) after each activity.

Be flexible with equipment

Some participants found safety gear physically or sensorily challenging. One participant preferred wearing his own riding helmet because it felt familiar and safe.

Increase staffing ratios

For climbing we often needed multiple staff members per participant to manage safety systems, physical prompting, and physical support.

Understand motor planning

Many nonspeakers experience apraxia/dyspraxia and motor planning challenges. Tasks that appear simple – walking backwards while abseiling, gripping an archery string, or sequencing movements – can be genuinely difficult.

For abseiling we found it helpful to send a buddy abseiler behind the participant, while archery often required lighter bows and physical support with grip and release.

Often the language we use needs to be altered – Dion often talks about the challenges he has with his body, what his mind wants isn’t always attuned with what his body will do – so the language we try and use is “Let’s see if we can bring your leg up here” rather than “lift your leg up here”. It’s more of a collaborative approach between the Instructor and the participant.

Check in with families

Families know participants best. Discussing goals, triggers, regulation strategies, and support needs beforehand and during, made the activities significantly more successful.

Presuming competence

One of the strongest values we tried to embed into camp culture is presuming competence. Our staff are trained to speak directly to nonspeakers in respectful ways.

One parent reflected:

“All staff talked to our son directly and in an age-appropriate way. This is uncommon in many other settings and was particularly appreciated.”

That feedback should be a talking point for all instructors.

How often do we unintentionally speak around participants rather than to them?

How often do we confuse communication differences with lack of understanding?

Presuming competence does not mean ignoring support needs. It means believing participants deserve challenge, respect, adventure, and opportunity.

Why this matters

Outdoor Education has always been about growth, connection, confidence, and belonging. But many nonspeaking young people remain excluded from these experiences simply because programmes have not been designed with them in mind. The reality is that meaningful inclusion is often less about expensive equipment and more about mindset, creativity, flexibility, and willingness.

This camp reminded us that when barriers are reduced and support is appropriate, nonspeaking young people can absolutely thrive in outdoor environments. It also reminded us that inclusion benefits everyone. Staff became more patient, more observant, more creative, and more reflective in their practice.

Families found community. And the nonspeakers themselves built friendships, confidence, and opportunities that many had never previously been offered.

Seeing Dion and Harry climbing together while Ally and I stood there cheering felt bigger than simply watching them complete a climb. It was part of a massive journey of changing systems, improving delivery and ultimately giving Dion the skills he required to go climbing with his dad. It felt like a glimpse of what outdoor education could become when we genuinely open the door a little wider.

The nonspeakers challenge us to believe in possibility, to ‘open our eyes’. And they were right.

Sometimes the most important thing we can do as instructors is slow down, listen differently, and believe in what people are capable of – even when their form of communication looks different from what we expect. Because adventures, challenges, and belonging should never be offered only to the people who communicate in conventional ways.

They belong to everyone.

Kate Parr | First Step Outdoors

RECREATION AOTEAROA: ADVOCACY

A significant part of Sam’s recent work at Recreation Aotearoa has focused on the Conservation Amendment Bill, legislation that sits at the heart of how we manage and protect the one-third of New Zealand’s land area that makes up our conservation estate.

While public debate has largely centred on proposed land-swap provisions, the Bill presents something equally important for the outdoor sector: a rare opportunity to improve the regulatory framework governing the use of Public Conservation Land.

NZOIA members are central to how many New Zealanders first connect with te Taiao. Through your work, young people and communities gain meaningful outdoor experiences that build resilience, deepen appreciation for our natural heritage, and create lasting support for conservation. In many ways, you are the bridge between conservation values and public understanding.

Recreation Aotearoa’s submission on the Bill is built around a simple principle: the long-standing hierarchy underpinning New Zealand’s conservation law must remain intact. Conservation should continue to be the primary purpose of public conservation land, recreation and public enjoyment the secondary purpose, and tourism and commercial activity subordinate to both.

We are concerned that aspects of the current Bill risk changing this balance. Provisions requiring the Department of Conservation to “recognise economic opportunities” and enable development to the “greatest extent practicable” could elevate economic considerations beyond their appropriate place. Our position is clear: the conservation estate is not an economic development zone. It is New Zealand’s largest recreation asset, and commercial activity should only occur where it supports conservation and recreation outcomes.

This principle is also relevant to the Bill’s provisions relating to land disposal and exchange. We welcomed the Minister’s recent decision to remove these provisions following significant public concern. However, if similar proposals return in the future, recreation values, public access, and community benefits must receive protection alongside ecological values.

For the outdoor sector, perhaps the most important opportunity for reform lies within the concessions regime.

For many years, educational and public-benefit activities have been required to obtain concessions, pay fees, and navigate administrative processes that were originally intended for commercial businesses. Our review of the 1996 legislative debates suggests Parliament designed the concession framework for commercial operations such as ski fields and adventure tourism businesses, not charitable outdoor education programmes.

As a result, Recreation Aotearoa is seeking a permanent legislative exemption for not-for-profit outdoor education providers and tertiary institutions. We have proposed three key changes:

- Expanding Section 14A to explicitly include outdoor education activities delivered by charitable trusts and not-for-profit organisations.
- Clarifying that cost-recovery charges are not considered “gain or reward”.
- Providing long-term certainty through the new National Conservation Policy Statement by exempting or pre-approving these activities.

NZOIA members are the stewards and facilitators of New Zealand’s greatest outdoor classroom. The law should recognise that your work is a professional public service, not a commercial enterprise.

We encourage you to read Recreation Aotearoa’s full submission on our website. Together, we can ensure that outdoor education and instruction continue to be recognised, supported, and protected as an essential part of New Zealand’s outdoor culture and conservation future.

In other news we recently hosted the National Outdoors Hui in Wellington. With 80 people from across the motu we discussed changes in education, safety, cultural competency and more. It was great to so much discussion and connection happening over the day and a big congratulations to the Award winners.

At the Hui we shared some of the data captured from the recent Workforce Surveys which many of you contributed to. A huge thank you for participating in gathering this evidence. It will be used to help inform the sector, and our partners on our workforce needs. We will release a thorough report that will be available but in the meantime a couple of quick insights for you

- 34% of respondents are guides / instructors
- NZOIA qualifications are highly valued in the sector, second only to first aid.
- 93% of respondents are confident in their skills and 92% are keen for ongoing training and development particularly in leadership/management and cultural competency
- 89% of people would choose this sector again if restarting in the workforce
- 94% of people either enjoy their work most of the time or love it.
- However a third of respondents might leave the sector in the next year driven mostly by low pay, burnout/fatigue and work/life balance.

We know working in the outdoors often involves big days away from home. We value the work you do, it makes a real difference to so many people, often in their foundational years. We hope capturing this data will help to make working in the outdoors more sustainable into the future.

Recreation Aotearoa
Te Whai Oranga

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