

British Gliding Association

Advice for Instructors - Gliding Lessons Involving People with Disabilities

Overview

The British Gliding movement prides itself on being as inclusive as is practicable. This means that clubs will encourage participants of all abilities and from all backgrounds to get involved and, indeed, to fly in club aircraft whenever possible to experience this great sport. It is important however, that the instructors and clubs involved as well as any disabled person consider any possible issues that their particular disability may present to flight safety. This document is intended to give advice to clubs when carrying out such flights.

Some trial lesson pupils may be under the misconception that gliding is extremely safe – perhaps they might think that it is as safe as commercial air transport. This is not the case, and this should be made clear to all our new students. Some disabilities might introduce extra risks. Many of these extra risks can be mitigated, but some cannot. One extra risk that may only apply to the pupil is that they may not be able, for whatever reason, to exit the aircraft in an emergency. This may be due to insufficient understanding of the situation and commands, or perhaps because of a physical disability. Whichever is the case, it is vitally important that this is discussed with the individual or their responsible person before committing aviation. Flying in the knowledge that the student cannot bail out, or exit a motorglider which is on fire should be a decision for the persons and pilots involved, however unpalatable this may be if the worst happened.

In any case, it is always the instructor's (or P1) decision as to whether the flight should go ahead. In some cases it may be enormously disappointing for all parties if the decision is not to go, but flight safety must always take precedence over disappointment. It may be possible to arrange flight in another type of glider or powered aeroplane depending on specifics. The contact details of the BGA and the British Disabled Flying Association can be found on the BGA website.

This advice below is split into three different categories; Physical Disability, Sensory Disability and General or Specific Learning Disability. Hopefully, this will serve as a set of examples on which to base specific thinking on a case by case basis.

1. Physical Disability

Often, a physical impairment means that the pupil is unable to move a limb or combination of limbs. One risk here is the possibility that the limb that is affected may interfere with the controls in some way. In particular, with lower limb paralysis, it is important that the rudder pedals be well out of the way and cannot be jammed. Limbs sometimes have a tendency to spasm. The severity and frequency of this should be discussed with the pupil. In most cases of paralysis, the pupil will have no sense of feeling in the affected limb, so they may not know if they are obstructing a control, or perhaps what to do about it.

Getting a student with a physical impairment in and out of the aircraft can be a concern for the instructor. It is important to ask the pupil for advice as to how to help them in and out without injury if needed. Bear in mind the possibility of injuring yourself by lifting incorrectly. Some clubs have lifts and cradles to help with this.

Some aircraft are modified to be flown by pilots with lower limb disability. These modifications, when in use in two seaters, can cause the controls to operate slightly differently in the non-disabled pilot seat. For instance, the airbrakes on a modified K21 require the instructor to move the handle away from the cockpit wall before opening or closing them if they are in a detent in the front cockpit. This might mean that an instructor's normal technique of simply pushing the handle forwards to close the airbrakes will not work! It is always advisable to read any supplements to flight manuals, and get advice from someone who knows before flying a modified aircraft.

2. Sensory Disability

Potential pilots with a sensory disability, those with a sight impairment or a hearing impairment or both, can still enjoy the gliding experience. Those people who are completely blind or partially sighted will clearly never be able to fly solo, but can still fly P2 although adjustments will have to be made in the briefing to exit the glider and deploying the parachute in an emergency. For those who have a hearing impairment, including those who have no hearing at all, there is no reason why they should not be able to learn to fly solo. Briefing and instruction in the air will need to be adapted as the instructor is generally behind the pupil and out of sight of the pupil. Briefing and instructions will need to be conducted on the ground before the flight. This is similar to how student drivers are taught to drive, where instructions are given while the car is stationary. Training takes longer as a result, but deaf drivers are as good as their hearing counterparts and the same is true for gliding. Again; ask the disabled person or carer for advice. Some clubs have developed in-cockpit visual aids to assist in the training of deaf pupils.

3. Learning Disabilities

Experience has shown that people who have learning difficulties can cause the greatest potential problem during flight because of the increased chance of poor communication and understanding (on both sides) and unpredictable behaviour from the pupil, an example being that an air experience pupil decided to get out at 500 feet. However, with the right preparation, these problems can often be addressed.

In the case of people with learning difficulties it is important to properly assess the potential pilot well before they get to fly. This assessment may well involve input from other people such as parents, carers, general practitioners and other medical, welfare and social service professionals. Young people under the age of 18 should have previously had a "risk assessment" carried out that could be helpfully used in making the assessment to fly or not. A further reduction in the risk can be made by carefully selecting P1 instructors who are particularly steady and experienced pilots.

4. A unified assessment system for all disabilities

A good assessment system to deal with all disabilities will minimise the risk to flight safety. Such a system should have the following characteristics. There should be a pre assessment phase and a final pre flight assessment conducted by the P1.

Initial Assessment.

Each potential pilot or trial lesson candidate is considered at the pre-assessment conducted with sensitivity in the clubhouse office or other convenient location (but not at the launch point). As much information as possible is gathered from the candidate as well as, where required, from parents, carers; where necessary expert medical advice should be sought from GPs and other medical professionals. This should be done a few days before the flight to allow time for all the information to be gathered and a considered assessment and decision arrived at. The person conducting the pre-assessment does not need to be the P1 or even an instructor, but must be familiar with the gliding environment, be a good judge of people and be open-minded about the possibilities of disabled people flying. The decision of the pre-assessment will then be used to inform the final assessment.

The pre-assessment also allows the candidate to highlight any special needs that are not immediately obvious, for example is a hoist needed at the launch point? It also allows the candidate to find out what will happen later on and be better prepared for the flight.

Final Assessment.

A final assessment is made by the P1 instructor for that flight on the day. If the instructor is happy that flight safety arrangements are acceptable and all the data gathered at the pre-assessment supports a decision to fly, then the flight takes place.

5. Instructor Guidance

Where an instructor has any doubts about how to adapt a particular flying lesson to meet a disabled pilot's needs, or where an instructor has concerns having assessed a planned training flight and concluded that a particular disability could impact on a safe or successful outcome, the instructor or the CFI should be encouraged to seek guidance. Unless the club has access to local expertise, that guidance is unlikely to be available on the day. The initial BGA point of contact for guidance is the BGA National Coach.

6. Conclusion

The decision to fly with and instruct a disabled person can sometimes be difficult and may involve an element of greater risk than flying with a non-disabled person. This element has to be correctly assessed and only when the potential risk is fully understood and assessed and has been identified as minimal and acceptable does the flight proceed. However, as stated earlier, the British Gliding movement does strive to be as inclusive as is practicable, and a disability should never be an automatic bar to flying in a glider.

7. Ongoing Training

As a disabled person's training develops, they will of course be exposed to new training challenges as well as new instructors who may be unfamiliar with the earlier initial assessment. To assist instructors, a disabled trainee pilot should be encouraged to keep relevant notes in their pilot logbook that can be used by instructors to ensure that they are familiar with the key points from the initial assessment and prompt an appropriate final assessment 'on the day'.

8. Instructor Training

It is recommended that the content of this document is referred to during BGA instructor training and instructor refresher training.

9. Document updates

This document, although it has been reviewed extensively is a gathering together of advice from parties with experience of flying with disabled people.

If you or your organisation would like to make changes or comment on the content of this document, please contact the BGA using the email address office@gliding.co.uk