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# Understanding and supporting neurodiversity

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Support strategies for parents and carers

British Dyslexia Association

Patoss

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## Introduction

The strategies presented in this booklet provide a starting point for helping to support children and young people with a range of learning differences.

In the first section, we list some strategies for supporting your child through their education, focusing on the key areas of literacy, language development, maths, and, for older learners, study skills.

The second section deals with more general situations, and gives advice for everyday life, including organization and establishing routines, as well as strategies for effective communication and giving instructions.

In the third section, strategies are listed according to different SpLD. This is not intended to imply that the strategies are only appropriate for one particular learning difference; indeed, it is important to realise that, just as learning differences overlap, so, too, do the strategies that work for different children and young people. However, we acknowledge that, for convenience, it may be useful to see information presented according to these categories.

Remember that the lists given here are far from exhaustive and many more ideas can be found on the recommended websites listed at the end of this document.

# 1 Supporting school and college work

## Top tips

- \* Help your child to understand their difficulties. They need to know that it is not stupidity that is causing the problem. It is simply a difference in the way they learn.
- \* Be flexible and responsive to the needs of your child. Try asking what works for them and how they learn best.
- \* Help your child to make a visual timetable / calendar or show them how to use their mobile phone to organise their school or college day.
- \* Make learning fun by relating it to your child's experiences and interests. Allow them to play an active role in coming up with ideas for learning - e.g. making up their own mnemonics to help with spelling ('mouse' - mice only use small entrances); or by drawing pictures to help remember spelling rules.
- \* Use games to support learning wherever possible.
- \* Relate your child's learning to their hobbies and interests.
- \* Encourage learning by experience and discovery rather than being told.
- \* Help your child build up knowledge and understanding one step at a time.
- \* Communicate with your child's school regularly - let each other know of any events that may have occurred during the day / night – children with ASD can be affected by a culmination of events that may cause challenging behaviour and it is beneficial for professionals to understand the child's recent activities and modify demands accordingly. It can also be useful to record activities in order to notice any patterns in behaviour to understand causes.

## Literacy

- Foster a love of books and reading by reading aloud to your child or use paired reading techniques to encourage them to join in. Help your child to choose books that reflect their interests.
- When you're reading together, draw attention to patterns in words, e.g. irregular spelling patterns - rough, tough, enough; prefixes and suffixes; rules for plural or -ed word endings.
- Look at the different aspects of words: What sounds are in it? What does it look like? What does it rhyme with? What do you do with it?
- Play games like 'I Spy'.
- With older children, show how words relate to each other in word families (e.g. telephone, microphone, phonic, phoneme, phonology).
- If your child has problems writing by hand, try using pencil grips or ergonomic pens. If you can, help them learn to touch type so they can prepare work on a computer (try using Dance Mat - <http://www.typing-games.org/a/learning/2010/0723/90.html>).
- Make sure your child's chair and table are at the correct height when they're doing homework. This is hugely important for handwriting and productivity.
- Help them to use multisensory methods by engaging more than one sense at a time when learning something new; e.g. ask them to say letter names out loud when they're writing out a difficult word.
- Avoid distracting stimuli, i.e. avoid being near windows, high traffic areas, the television or their mobile phone when they're doing homework.
- If your child is squinting or constantly moving the page close to or away from their eyes as they try to read, arrange for an optometrist assessment.
- Coloured overlays or using tinted paper can often help children and young people with visual stress disorders. Try experimenting with these and, if effective, ask the school to provide them.

## Language development

- Model what you want to hear. If your child says something in the wrong way, repeat the right way back to them instead of correcting them. If they say “Dog him sit...” repeat back, “Yes, the dog is sitting.”
- Add another word or two to help develop their language. If your child says “That man walking” you could say “Yes, that man is walking on the grass.”
- Demonstrate useful social phrases: “It looks like you want to join in. You could say, ‘Dean, can I have a turn please?’”
- Teach new words and concepts – children with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) need repetition and explanation.
- Link new words and ideas to what they already know “Enormous, that means very big. Remember the elephant we saw in the zoo? He was enormous.”
- Try and avoid tricky parts of language, like idioms: “I’m all ears” or metaphors: “Life is a journey” because they make language even more confusing for children.
- If you use difficult words, idioms or jokes and see your child is confused, explain the language to them.

## Maths

- Use 'concrete' materials and hands-on multisensory methods, e.g. cuisenaire rods, counters, sweets, etc.
- Point out patterns, e.g. in multiplication tables.
- Explain mathematical processes rather than just saying, 'Do it like this.'
- Explain mistakes clearly and show how to correct them.
- Don't expect or rely on rote-learning. Many learners with SpLD have weak memory skills and won't be able to rely on memorising. It's much more useful to teach them to use resources such as multiplication squares.
- Use over-learning and be prepared to repeat over and over again.



- Teach through games and use topics that interest and motivate your child.
- Use everyday situations as learning opportunities, e.g. going to the supermarket, cooking and baking, laying the table, loading the dishwasher or washing machine.
- Tap into the child's interests and relate maths work to things that they enjoy doing.

## Study skills

- Make full use of free assistive technologies, e.g.
  - a mobile phone for reminders of upcoming appointments;
  - the screen reader function on a mobile phone, tablet or laptop;
  - a screen tint app to change the background colour of the computer screen.
- Use cheap, low-tech methods, such as post-it notes, to plan essays and organise study.
- Aim to have essays and course work completed a week before the deadline so there is enough time to check and edit.
- Ensure that your child is receiving all the available support at school, college or university.
- Encourage them to make a revision plan well in advance of exams and stick to it!
- Experiment with different memory techniques, such as mnemonics or using stories to embed facts.
- Encourage active reading, involving taking notes or drawing diagrams / spider graphs to record key points.

## 2 General behaviour and everyday situations

### Top tips

- \* Help your child to develop self-understanding about their needs and what works for them.
- \* Use positive role models (e.g. celebrities with SpLD) to help boost confidence and self-esteem.
- \* Honestly acknowledge the difficulties being experienced.
- \* Listen to your child and respect their needs and their way of seeing the world.
- \* Children and young people with SpLD can often experience feelings of frustration and anger, resulting in behavioural issues. Be aware of this and look for the root causes of challenging behaviour, showing patience and empathy.
- \* Boost your child's self-esteem by encouraging them to spend time doing the things that they enjoy and feel good about.
- \* Try to provide a safe, quiet area for your child to go to if they begin to feel anxious.

### Communication

- Understand how your child prefers to communicate and use that method. Establish a non-verbal method of communicating at times of increased anxiety when your child may not be able to communicate in their usual method – e.g. a card that your child can show you if they need to access a quiet space/time.
- Use literal language rather than idioms and metaphors, which they might misunderstand.
- Avoid sarcasm.

## Giving instructions

- Give clear simple explanations and be aware of the need for careful use of language. Many SpLD affect speech and language and almost always affect processing speed.
- Keep instructions short and precise and maybe ask your child to repeat them back to you in their own words.
- Break down what you want your child to do into small steps. Try and keep instructions in sequential order, so instead of saying, "Right, it's dinner time-- but before you come can you tidy up please?" Say, "Things away, dinner time."
- Leave time between instructions or information; allowing a few seconds enables children and young people to process what they have heard and formulate responses. You could call this 'thinking time'. It can help to tell them what to do in this time. "Have some thinking time then tell me what you think."
- Give your child lots of visual clues about what you want them to do, and to help understanding. For example, you could use your hands to gesture, or draw pictures or use photographs to help them.
- Where appropriate use symbols or signs.
- Try and get eye contact if you can, but also know some people with ADHD or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) listen more actively when fiddling with something and not looking at you.
- Tell your child what they can be doing as opposed to what they should be doing.

## Organisation

- Visual timetables or checklists are really useful to help organisation. Try involving your child in making their own.
- Label equipment and resources using pictures or symbols.
- Help your child to feel comfortable with seeking assistance (many children won't ask for help).

- Support and do not criticise or penalise organisational weaknesses.
- Help your child to understand concepts of time by using a stopwatch or egg timer to time activities.

## Routines

- Provide routine and structure – this is particularly reassuring for people with dyspraxia/ Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) or autism, who often experience ‘anticipatory anxiety’, worrying about activities /situations that they might find difficult. Feeling confident that they know what’s going to happen and that they have the motor / organisational skills to be successful is crucial.
- Provide visual cues to support routines. This is important as children with SpLD may not be able to hold information in their head, so it helps to see it ‘written down’ (often better to use pictures rather than words). It also helps children to process/ cope with changes in plans if they can ‘see’ the change (rather than having just to hear and ‘imagine’ it).
- Make rules and rituals clear and precise, e.g. no eating in the room or all phones are switched to silent in specific certain situations.

## Practical activities

- Provide support to help your child master practical activities that are important to their everyday life, e.g. tying their shoelaces, using scissors and cutlery. This will boost their self-esteem and confidence.
- Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) become easily frustrated so monitor their mood at all times.
- Give plenty of opportunities to use up excess energy.
- Transitions – structure and routine are very important for a child with autism to help manage anxiety and stress. Try to introduce any changes to routine and structure with

advance warning to help a child prepare for a transition. When visiting new places, support the transition by using pictures, photos, google maps, pre-visits or journey familiarisation.



### 3 Support strategies for Specific Learning Differences

In this section, strategies are listed according to different SpLD. It is important to stress that a formal identification of learning difference is not a prerequisite for putting these support strategies in place. It is also important to note that many of the strategies below will make learning more accessible to all children, whether they have an SpLD or not.

A number of strategies appear more than once in the list. This is intentional and aims to highlight the overlapping nature of SpLD and their associated challenges. You may also find that a strategy listed under ADHD, for example, works equally well for a child or young person who is dyspraxic.

Remember that there are no hard and fast rules. Be prepared to experiment, to talk through different ideas and strategies with your child, and to discover together what works for them.

#### Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

- Keep instructions short and precise and maybe ask them to repeat them back to you.
- Avoid distracting stimuli when they're trying to concentrate, i.e. avoid being near windows, high traffic areas, computers.
- Help them to feel comfortable with seeking assistance (most people with ADHD won't ask).
- Keep waiting time to a minimum.
- Try and get eye contact if you can but also know some children and young people with ADHD listen more actively when fiddling with something and not looking at you.
- Monitor their mood at all times: children and young people with ADHD become easily frustrated.
- Make rules and rituals clear and precise, e.g. no food in the bedroom.
- Support and do not criticise or penalise organisational weaknesses.

- Allow movement breaks, time to stretch, walk around and use up excess energy. Pace time so sitting is divided up into chunks.
- Tell them what they can be doing as opposed to what they should be doing.

## Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

- Use visual timetables to show what is coming up next and throughout the day – could be a 'now and next board', a daily timetable, or a calendar to visually show the structure of the day.
- Present instructions visually / in writing – depending on abilities; provide visual or written instructions as a back-up to verbal instruction for them to review and look back to if needed.
- Allow processing time (thinking time) – a process delay is very common in ASD; give them time to process what you have said before repeating / asking other questions. You can check understanding by asking them to repeat back instructions using different words.
- Provide a sensory / quiet space – try to find out the sensory differences they may have and adapt their environment accordingly. Provide a safe quiet area for them to use if they begin to feel anxious; make sure they know they can visit this space at any time.
- Understand how they prefers to communicate and use that method. Establish a non-verbal method of communicating at times of increased anxiety when they may not be able to communicate in their usual method – e.g. a card that they can show you if they need to access a quiet space / time.
- Communicate with the school daily to let each other know of any events that may have occurred during the day / night – with ASD it can be a culmination of events that may cause a challenging behaviour and it is beneficial for professionals to understand the child's recent activities and modify demands accordingly. It can also be useful to record activities in order to notice any patterns in behaviour to understand causes.
- Use time management aids (e.g. egg timer; mobile phone timer)

- Use literal language – avoid sarcasm / idioms. Be careful with language used and try to keep instructions simple and straightforward.
- Support the generalisation of skills from one environment to another and use everyday activities to embed learning (e.g. shopping trips to practise life skills).
- Prepare for transitions – structure and routine are very important for a child or young person with autism to help manage anxiety and stress; try to introduce any changes to routine and structure with advance warning to them prepare for a transition. When visiting new places, support the transition by using pictures, photos, google maps, pre visits or journey familiarisation.
- Utilise special interests – many people with ASD will have a special interest; if possible, utilise this interest in a subject and incorporate it into learning to increase levels of interest and motivation.

## Developmental Language Disorder (DCD)

- Break down what you want the child or young person to do into small steps.
- Try and keep instructions in sequential order.  
Instead of saying, "Right, it's dinner time-- but before you come can you tidy up please?" Say, "Things away, dinner time."
- Leave time between instructions or information, allowing a few seconds enables them to process what they have heard and formulate responses.  
You could call this 'thinking time'. It can help to tell them what to do in this time.  
"Have some thinking time; take a moment to think about what I've said."
- Give them lots of visual clues about what you want them to do, and to help understanding.
  - You could use your hands to gesture
  - Draw pictures or use photographs to help them
  - Where appropriate use symbols or signs
  - Use prompt cards (for example, a reminder to brush their teeth)

- Visual timetables or checklists help with organisation
- Label equipment and resources using pictures or symbols
- Model what you want to hear.
  - If a child says something in the wrong way, repeat the right way back to them instead of correcting them. If a child says “Dog him sit...” repeat back, “Yes, the dog is sitting.”
  - Add another word or two to help develop their language. If a child says “That man walking” you could say “Yes, that man is walking on the grass.”
  - Demonstrate useful social phrases: “it looks like you want to join in....you could say ‘Dean, can I have a turn please?’”
- Teach new words and concepts – children and young people with DLD need repetition and explanation.
  - Link new words and ideas to what they already know “Enormous, that means very big. Remember the elephant we saw in the zoo? He was enormous.”
  - Look at the different aspects of words: What sounds are in it? What does it look like? What does it rhyme with? What do you do with it?
  - Provide support for specific subject words, e.g. pin up words or word lists throughout the house.
  - Try and use consistent vocabulary, e.g. take away, but not minus or subtract.
- Try and avoid tricky parts of language, like idioms: “I’m all ears” or metaphors: “Life is a journey” because they make language even more confusing.

If you do use difficult words, idioms or jokes and see they are confused, explain what you meant.
- Check understanding, and with older children encourage them to check.
  - You could ask them to tell you if there are any words that they did not know, and ask a couple of questions, for example “Where are you going to put it?” to make sure that they know what you have asked them to do.

- Give children short phrases to use to ask questions – “I’m not sure about.....”, “Can you say it again, please.”

## Dyscalculia

- Use 'concrete' materials and hands-on multisensory methods, e.g. cuisenaire rods, counters, etc.
- Point out patterns, e.g. in multiplication tables.
- Explain mathematical processes rather than just saying 'Do it like this.'
- Explain mistakes clearly and show how to correct them. Don't criticise or make fun of mistakes.
- Don't expect or rely on rote-learning. Many learners with SpLD have weak memory skills and won't be able to rely on memorising. It's much more useful to teach learners to use resources such as multiplication squares.
- Use over-learning and be prepared to repeat over and over again.
- Teach through games and use topics that interest and motivate the learner.
- Use everyday situations as learning opportunities, e.g. going to the supermarket, cooking and baking, laying the table, loading the dishwasher or washing machine.
- Teach in a structured and cumulative way, building up knowledge and understanding one step at a time.

## Dyslexia

- Present the “big picture”: use a top down rather than bottom up approach.
- Present information in a structured and cumulative way by building on, recapping and reinforcing existing knowledge.
- Make learning personal and meaningful. Relate new learning to the child's or young person's experiences and interests. Allow them to play an active role in coming up with ideas for learning - e.g. by making up their own mnemonics or by drawing pictures to aid memory.

- Allow extra 'think' time for processing information and formulating responses.
- Encourage learning by experience rather than being told.
- Use overlearning - recap information using different methods.
- Use multisensory methods - engage more than one sense at a time when presenting new information; e.g. ask them to say letter names out loud when they're writing a word; use movement or gestures to reinforce mathematical concepts such as addition or multiplication.
- Ensure materials are appropriately adapted; e.g. break large chunks of text down into bullet points; use visuals and diagrams to make information more memorable; avoid presenting information as black print on a white background.
- Be flexible and responsive to the needs of the learner. Try asking what works for them and how they learn best.
- Draw attention to patterns in words, e.g. bat, cat, sat; irregular spelling patterns - rough, tough, enough; prefixes and suffixes; rules for plural or -ed word endings.
- Foster a love of books and reading by reading aloud to your child or using paired reading techniques to encourage them to join in. Allow them to choose books that reflect their interests and ensure that they have access to plenty of books and / or magazines that reflect their interests. Try using graphic novels to encourage reading.
- Check for visual stress if there appear to be physical problems with reading, and, if necessary, refer to an optometrist. Experiment with different coloured overlays and tinted paper.

## Dyspraxia / Developmental Co-ordination Disorder

- Honestly acknowledge the difficulties being experienced
- Provide routine and structure – this is reassuring for people with dyspraxia/DCD who often experience 'anticipatory anxiety', worrying about activities / situations that they might find difficult. Feeling confident that they know what's going to happen and that they have the motor / organisational skills to be successful is crucial.

- Provide visual cues to support routines. This is important as people with dyspraxia may not be able to hold all information in their head, so it helps to see it 'written down' (it could be pictures rather than words). It also helps children with dyspraxia to process / cope with changes in plans if they can 'see' the change (rather than having just to hear and 'imagine' it, if that makes sense)
- Provide support to help them master practical activities that are important to their everyday life. This will boost their self-esteem and confidence.
- Make sure their chair / table height is correct and comfortable. Hugely important for handwriting and productivity.
- Encourage the use of augmentative technology and aids.
- Help them to develop social skills; encourage them to make friends.
- Gross motor skills such as throwing, catching, or kicking a ball, can be problematic. Slow things down, teach the underlying skills.
- Give clear simple explanations and be aware of the need for careful use of language. Dyspraxia can and does affect speech and language and almost always processing speed.
- Discover learning styles and play to strengths.



For further ideas and approaches visit the following websites:

For information about ADHD:

- [youngminds.org.uk/find-help/conditions/adhd](http://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/conditions/adhd)

For information about autism:

- [www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk](http://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk)
- [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)
- [www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk](http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk)

For information about Developmental Language Disorder:

- [www.talkingpoint.org.uk](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk)

For information about dyscalculia:

- [www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/dyslexic/dyscalculia](http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/dyslexic/dyscalculia)
- [www.ronitbird.com/dyscalculia](http://www.ronitbird.com/dyscalculia)

For information about dyslexia:

- [www.dyslex.io](http://www.dyslex.io)
- [www.bdadyslexia.org.uk](http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk)
- [www.thedyslexia-spldtrust.org.uk](http://www.thedyslexia-spldtrust.org.uk)
- [www.helenarkell.org.uk](http://www.helenarkell.org.uk)

For information about dyspraxia/DCD:

- [www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk](http://www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk)