

# The Inclusive Classroom: Accommodating Specific Learning Differences

Firstly, see the student and not just the label of their Specific Learning Difference (SpLD). Not everyone with an SpLD has it to the same degree as others, or displays the same symptoms. Each person has their own patterns of behaviour. SpLDs are also not necessarily mutually exclusive. Therefore, students with SpLDs should be handled in a case-by-case manner by individual accommodation. Not every strategy will work with every student – trial and error, observation & informed practice are essential. Strategies that can help SpLD learners are often *good teaching practice*. They can therefore be beneficial to all learners.

## Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder (ADD/ADHD)

There are 3 main types of AD(H)D:

1. Predominantly hyperactive-impulsive
2. Predominantly inattentive
3. Combined (= majority of ADHD cases)

Effects may include:

- Inattentive & easily distracted
- Difficulty following instructions
- Moving from one incomplete activity to another
- Hyperactive (restless, fidgety)
- Impulsive
- Interrupting others (+ difficulty waiting turn)
- Disruptive (Behavioural Disorders may incl. Oppositional Defiant Disorder– arguing & intentionally defying; Conduct Disorder – major antisocial activity).

Other possible issues:

- Depression, anxiety, poor self-esteem & obsessive behaviour
- Speech, language & coordination problems
- Over ½ of people diagnosed with ADHD also have another SpLD, such as dyslexia

### Strategies for support

- Establish clear acceptable classroom behaviour (& why). This will help ADHD students to understand & meet the expectations of teachers and the learning community.
- Signal clearly the start of a lesson/activity. Use a visual and/or aural cue.
- Establish eye contact with any ADHD student before giving instructions, etc.
- Tell students the lesson aims and why they're relevant/desirable (also list on board).
- Tell students exactly what materials they need & any time limits etc.
- Provide short, clear, well-staged instructions. Ask students to repeat them back to you. Perhaps also write them on the board.
- Check regularly student is on task & have an unobtrusive signal/cue they understand.
- Give a clear role in group and pair work.
- Vary the pace & type of activity. Note: ADHD students often do well in competitive games or other intense/rapid activities.
- Avoid sensory overload.

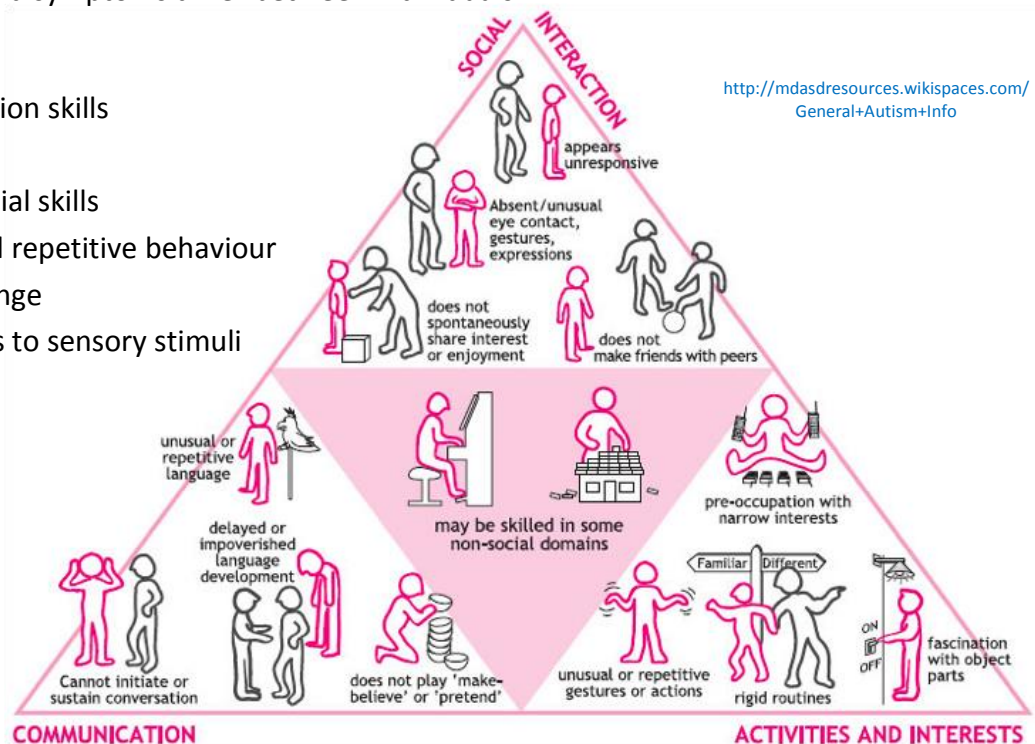
- Reduce distractions in the learning environment (i.e. visual, aural & physical stimuli)
- Allow a student with ADHD to use a fidget spinner, squeeze a rubber ball or tap something that doesn't make noise as a physical outlet. Permit frequent "breaks" as appropriate.
- Summarize key points. Involve students in this.
- Be specific about homework. Make sure students have a written record of what they have to do & what they'll need to do it (e.g. equipment, time, place etc.). Remind them of deadlines. Ask students (individually, chorally) to repeat assignments back to you.
- Agree & set behavioural targets (e.g. to raise a hand & only answer a teacher question when called on). Target setting needs to be done in a positive and not punitive way, and targets need to be clear, realistic and achievable. Students have to meet you at least half-way.
- Review the achievement of targets with the student at the end of the lesson/week. Praise progress and achievement. This is essential. Update targets, removing ones the student has achieved and agreeing new ones.

## Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

People with ASD can find school difficult for a number of reasons, generally related to difficulties with communication, social skills and sensory sensitivity. It is not "all or nothing", but is on a sliding scale like all SpLDs and symptoms differ between individuals.

Effects may include:

- Poor communication skills
- Literal meanings
- Difficulty with social skills
- Inappropriate and repetitive behaviour
- Resistance to change
- Extreme reactions to sensory stimuli



### Strategies for support

- Set clear classroom rules for acceptable behaviour & set targets (perhaps in writing).
- Help to teach social skills.
- Reward positive behaviour with positive enforcement. Find opportunities throughout the day to tell your student what he/she did right. Compliment both successes and worthy attempts at success. Be specific with your words so that your student knows why you are providing praise.
- Withhold positive reinforcement for inappropriate behaviour. Be clear why, and what the student needs to do.
- Build on strengths, skills and interests (as appropriate).

- Get the student's attention before speaking with him/her.
- Communicate clearly using simple, direct & literal language. Don't use idioms or figurative language.
- Explain the lesson aims (perhaps list on WB too). Depict these as desirable and relevant.
- Ensure instructions are clear, literal and structured (& clearly/logically sequential).
- Describe in detail & check understanding.
- Give the student time to process information. ASD students may need more than others.
- ASD students may need extra time to complete tasks. Pace lessons so they aren't rushed.
- If a topic is non-literal (e.g. a poem) give the student a list of words/phrases & their meanings or go through these in class.
- Use visual aids to instruct, organize, prompt & motivate (e.g. list & illustrate the steps required to borrow a book from the school library).
- Provide hard copies of information (e.g. timetables, rooms, assignments) & update these. Consider creating a visual schedule that includes daily activities for students.
- Manage change of plans. Any change can increase anxiety for a student with ASD. Make an effort to provide schedule consistency and avoid sudden changes. Recurring transitions, such as teacher substitution, may cause anxiety. Make sure that your student understands that sometimes planned activities can be changed, cancelled, or rescheduled. Prepare them for change whenever possible; tell them about alterations to routine, assemblies, fire drills, guests, and testing schedules.
- Create an ASD-friendly environment (e.g. avoiding sensory overload – lighting, noise & smells [natural/artificial], too many patterns, clutter [e.g. furniture & unnecessary obstructions]; use low-arousal colours).
- Give frequent reassurance & feedback so the student knows they're moving in the right direction or completing the correct task. Use frequent check-ins to monitor student progress and stress.
- Allow for "time outs" or an "escape" when the student starts to feel overloaded (system/signal to know when necessary, agreed routine, appropriate space, favoured book etc.).

## Dysgraphia

'Dysgraphia' means someone has difficulty expressing their thoughts in writing and it may even be identified as a 'disorder of written expression'. Generally, it's used to refer to very poor handwriting. However, there can be other issues too. Students with dysgraphia can be very self-conscious about the fact that others have trouble reading their writing, and they are aware that they're not performing to the same level as their peers. They may also suffer from feelings of stress, anxiety and issues with self-esteem. This may lead to resistance to writing.

Effects may include:

- Odd wrist, arm, body, or paper orientations while writing
- Cramping of fingers or pain while writing; writing fatigue
- Excessive erasures or crossing out
- Inappropriate mix of upper & lower-case letters; inconsistent form & size of letters; unfinished letters
- Misuse of lines and margins

- Inefficient speed of copying
- Inattentiveness over details when writing
- Frequent need of verbal cues
- Referring heavily on vision to write
- Issues with spelling
- Difficulty translating ideas to writing, sometimes using the wrong words altogether
- Problems completing written assignments that are appropriate in length and content, or within given time

### Strategies for support

- Offer alternative ways of submitting work and the modification of tasks to avoid, or compensate for, the area of weakness. For example, students with dysgraphia might present answers/work orally, or make notes in picture form.
- Give extra time in writing tasks.
- Ideas first; writing later. It's more important for students to get their main ideas down on paper without also having to struggle with details of spelling, punctuation, etc. at the same time. They can try writing just one key word or phrase for each paragraph, and then go back later to fill in the details. After this, they can review their work for spelling errors etc.
- Some students may benefit from using a laptop or tablet computer in class so they don't have to deal with the frustration of falling behind their peers or the embarrassment of sharing poor handwriting.
- Use 'writing frames' which provide a basic structure for written work, providing a starting point and a framework for students.
- Experiment with different pen/pencils & grips.
- Sometimes a 'writing slope' may help. A4 folders can sometimes substitute.
- 'Tablet' chairs may compound issues and frustration in class. Try to use rooms with desks.
- Be encouraging & supportive; be selective with criticism. Teachers should be sensitive in comments on student writing (e.g. focus more on content/attempt than presentation).
- Be sensitive about sharing dysgraphic students' writing and asking them to write in public (e.g. on the classroom board).
- If students need to copy from the board, a student with dysgraphia may well need a lot more time & still produce flawed work. Allow for more time or alternatives, such as taking a photo on their mobile, provide handouts or printouts (IWBs) etc.
- With written tests, dysgraphic students may need extra time. Other allowances for dysgraphia might also be considered in order to "level the playing field" – such as modified marking criteria, perhaps focussing more on content and intent than presentation and spelling. Alternatively, provision could be made for the student to use a computer.
- In more severe cases of dysgraphia, it may be beneficial to use methods of assessing a student's knowledge other than by written tests (e.g. oral testing, oral compositions etc.). This may help cause less frustration for the learner as they're able to get their ideas or knowledge across to the teacher without worrying how to write it down.

## Hearing Impairment

Hearing impairment is on a sliding scale and is individual. It may affect one or both ears. The learner may have had hearing loss since birth, it may have developed over time or been the result of an accident. “Lip reading” may be a misnomer as not every sound can be seen on the lips (e.g. /x/, /k/, /g/), and some aren’t easily distinguishable from each other visually or cannot be distinguished from each other (e.g. /n/, /t/, /d/). What people with hearing loss often actually do is “message read” by filling in the visual “gaps” of lip reading. They do this by using their knowledge of the language, as well as situational & contextual clues. “Message reading” can be especially difficult in a second language for hearing-impaired learners as they may lack the linguistic knowledge they need. Also, some sounds may be different from their L1 or non-existent.

Note: Hearing aids don’t always work well with some audio media. They also amplify unwanted sounds too (e.g. background noise).

- Find out about the degree of hearing loss the learner has. Also, find out other characteristics (e.g. One or both ears? Can they hear recorded audio?).
- Be aware of and reduce any interfering background noise as far as possible.
- Check on the best seating position for each learner (e.g. Does one ear hear better or worse/ Which one? Can the learner see you/other students clearly? Distance from audio equipment? Distance away from noise interference?). Note: Right in front of the teacher isn’t always the best position.
- Check that the learner can see everyone’s face for expression or lip-reading.
- Make sure the light falls on your face and lips. Do not stand with your back to a window. When using an IWB ensure that the beam does not prevent the learner from seeing your face. If necessary, turn on the lights even during daytime.
- Some sounds can’t be seen on the lips, and it is hard to ‘message-read’ unfamiliar words (especially if English is a second language). Always have a pen & paper (or a digital equivalent) or images on hand as a means of clarification.
- Indicate where a learner is speaking from during class discussion and only allow one speaker at a time where possible.
- Speak naturally. Speaking too quickly or slowly can distort the way sounds look (especially when English is a second language).
- Rephrase. Repeating the same word or sentence over and over again does not promote understanding.
- Provide lists of vocabulary, visual clues and written texts.
- Find out if the student can hear recorded audio. If there are difficulties, provide a summary or transcript depending on the student’s needs.
- Context is key! When the student knows the context related to what you are saying, their level of comprehension rises significantly. If you can, let the student know in advance the content/context of the lesson (perhaps with a written reference/lesson map).

Adapted from: *Creating an inclusive learning experience for English language learners with specific needs* (p.48, British Council, 2012); *Finding the key in the apple* (Ganin-Epstein, N. p.10, IATEFL, *Voices #242*)

## Some Longer-Term Strategies for Support: ADHD & ASD

- Make it clear to the student what behaviour is acceptable and what is not in the learning environment (& why). This will help them to understand & meet the expectations of teachers and the learning community as a whole.
- Agree together on weekly learning & behaviour targets. Students have to meet you at least half-way.
- Target setting needs to be done in a positive and not punitive way.
- Targets need to be realistic and achievable.
- Use a Weekly Individual Target sheet (WIT) to set & review targets for the student. The teacher & student both need copies of this form.
- Review the achievement of these targets with the student at the end of the week.
  - Ask them to look at their WIT.
  - Ask the student what they have done so far.
  - Discuss.
  - Praise progress and achievement. This is essential.
  - Update targets, removing those the student has achieved and agreeing new ones for the following week.