

# Strategies for supporting children with additional learning needs at home

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We know that children with additional learning needs experience barriers and difficulties in their learning. We also know that all children are different and can thrive and make progress with the right support. You know your children best, and we hope that these strategies will provide you with extra ideas for supporting learning at home. The strategies are in specific sections entitled *General learning difficulties; Dyslexia; Memory and processing speed difficulties; Fine motor (including handwriting) difficulties; and Autism*. However, we know that not all children with additional learning needs fit into these categories. Please take a look at all of the sections, as many strategies are relevant to children with different learning needs too.

## General learning difficulties:

*Where the child is working at considerably earlier stages of learning relative to expectations for their age group, across a range of areas (e.g. reading, writing, maths and language development).*

- A child learns best when their work is tricky enough to challenge them, but not so tricky that they need constant adult support. If they can't do the work with a degree of independence after being given some initial adult support, the task needs to be simplified and/or broken down into smaller steps. This may mean using learning materials from an earlier year group.
- Trying and failing at a task which is too difficult over and over again can quickly lead to a child giving up. Try starting a little easier and then increase the difficulty as they grown in confidence.
- All learners need to experience success in order to feel motivated. So before starting something new, recap something they have learnt successfully before (e.g. a book they have read). This promotes 'over-learning' (repetition) and starts them off feeling confident.
- Don't 'set the bar' too low either! We should have high expectations for all children. Children are often good at setting their own challenges (e.g. how many spellings to learn, how many sentences to write, etc), so ask them what they think they can do today.
- Don't rely just on spoken and written words for learning. Children need physical objects, movement, pictures, videos, etc. to support their understanding. In maths for example, try using objects such as counters, and creating 'real-life scenarios' (such as sharing sausages for dinner when learning about division). For literacy, try acting out a story, drawing the pictures in sequence, taking 'freeze-frame' photographs and 'hot-seating' (asking each other questions in character).
- Use websites such as BBC Bitesize for activity ideas: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/primary>
- Get out and about - children's language and understanding develops best from real-world experiences and talking with adults and each other. Visit the park for a bug hunt, read and recreate a story in the garden, write a diary entry about a day-trip, make a video presentation, etc. Try not to be too focused on worksheet learning.
- Learn with your child, but avoid doing the thinking for them. If they're writing a story, can you write one too? Children love it when adults make 'mistakes' and need their help for example.
- Praise effort and risk-taking in learning (e.g. trying a tricky spelling). Children can be put off when they feel they have 'failed'. Producing 'perfect' work is less important than having the confidence to give it a go, take a plunge and be creative.

## Dyslexia:

*A specific learning difficulty which mainly affects reading and writing skills, but can also affect other areas such as processing and remembering information, and organisation skills.*

- Be sensitive and avoid putting pressure on the child. Dyslexic children can feel low on confidence and high in anxiety about skills which other people may take for granted. They may avoid certain areas of learning or 'act out' if they feel they are at risk of failure (such as writing).
- Play to the child's strengths. Dyslexia is not about 'low intelligence'. Can they record their learning in a different way? Such as through drawing a comic strip, typing, video- or voice-recording their ideas, drawing a diagram, bullet-points, some adult scribing, etc.
- Dance Mat Typing helps to teach typing skills: <https://www.bbc.com/bitesize/articles/z3c6tfr>
- Set small-step targets and work on them repetitively (such as learning to spell a small set of new words rather than trying too many at once).
- Celebrate success and effort over 'perfect' results (e.g. full marks in a spelling test).
- Factor reading and writing into everyday life, e.g. writing a shopping list, reading a sign, etc.
- Provide extra time for tasks, especially those involving reading and writing but also maths. Dyslexic children are often able to complete tasks but can become frustrated by running out of time.
- Provide extra time for them to consider and respond to questions.
- Read together for pleasure, not just for school's sake. The more language they hear, the better their literacy skills will be. Reading should be a rewarding and bonding activity. If it's a threatening thing to do, the child may avoid it.
- Reinforce strategies rather than doing the hard work for the child. For instance, if they come across a tricky word when reading a text, don't jump to telling them what it is. Try asking: *Can you sound it out? Can you cover up part of the word and read it in bits? Read on from the word - does that help you work out what it might be?* If you do need to give them the word, take turns practising saying it and see if they can spot it when it comes up again.
- Keep texts clear and easy to read - avoid jazzy fonts, different colours and cramped/small text.
- Speak to your child's teacher about possible tools to support reading, such as a coloured Reading Ruler if they experience 'visual stress': <https://www.crossboweducation.com/reading-rulers>
- Minimise copying activities – support them to use their knowledge of sounds.
- Use a mini whiteboard or sheet of paper to try out spellings and sentences first.
- Use magnetic or wooden letters to practise putting sounds and words together.
- Provide some additional 'scaffolds' for writing tasks, such as 'sentence starters' for the child to complete, or question prompts to structure their writing.
- Check out <http://www.spellingzappers.com/> for multisensory ideas for learning spellings.
- See the memory and processing speed strategies below.

## Memory and processing speed difficulties:

*Some children have difficulty processing information as it comes to them (e.g. struggling to keep up with lots of spoken information), as well as holding and using that information in their heads (what we call 'working memory'). There are lots of reasons a child might have these difficulties, including dyslexia, ADHD or general learning difficulties, but some children may not have other learning needs.*

- Speak a little more slowly and avoid giving too much verbal information at once.
- Give the child more time to process information by leaving longer pauses for them to think and respond.
- 'Chunk' instructions and information into smaller parts.

- Repeat and revisit previously-covered learning. Children often need to revisit and practise learning for it to make it into their long-term memory.
- Encourage 'visualisation', such as closing the child closing their eyes and imagining how characters might feel or behave.
- Encourage the child to 'teach' you – for instance asking them to explain their learning. This is a chance to check what they have understood, as well as consolidating their learning for them.
- Reduce distractions by providing a quiet and comfortable place to work, without gadgets!
- Talking Tins (available on Amazon, etc.) are a useful tool which allow spoken sentences to be recorded. The child can then listen back in order to write the sentences down. You might also use a voice memo app on an iPad or other device for this purpose.
- Provide written, numbered instructions for a learning task, such as on a mini whiteboard or sheet of paper. This gives the child something concrete to refer to and supports their independence.
- Encourage note-taking and highlighting, for instance providing the child with a notes book or sheet of paper for taking notes and working things out.

### **Fine motor (including handwriting) difficulties:**

*Fine motor skills involve the movements of the small muscle of the hands including the wrists and fingers. Difficulties in this area can affect handwriting, independence (such as dressing and eating) and physical confidence. Difficulties may be related to a specific need such as developmental co-ordination disorder (also known as dyspraxia), dyslexia or physical disability. However, this is not always the case.*

- Physical activity is important to build strength and dexterity. For instance, climbing, pulling, bike-riding, throwing and sports, as well as other tasks which require the use of the child's hands, such as cooking, gardening, crafts and drawing.
- If handwriting difficulties make it very hard for the child to record their ideas (which may also mean they avoid writing in general), try other forms of recording in addition to handwriting (see the dyslexia list for suggestions).
- There are tools which can support handwriting including pencil grips and sloping writing boards. Talk to your child's teacher about these. There are lots of products available here: <https://www.fantasticdyspraxic.co.uk/shop/>
- Specific fine-motor exercises include:
  - Using their tripod fingers to roll out small balls of playdough or putty with a rolling movement of their fingers, and small sausages with a back and forth movement of their fingers.
  - Cutting small squares of crepe or tissue paper, and squashing one at a time using the tripod fingers of both hands. Ask the child to use just the tripod fingers of their dominant hand to roll the crumpled paper into a smaller, tighter ball.
  - Using pegs and peg boards to make patterns. This activity requires them to use fine motor movements to pick up, move and insert pegs.
  - Picking up objects using large tweezers.
  - Using small-sized screwdrivers like those found in building sets.
  - Lacing and sewing activities such as stringing beads, Cheerios or macaroni, etc.
  - Using eye-droppers to 'pick up' coloured water for colour mixing or to make artistic designs on paper.
  - Rolling small balls out of tissue paper, then gluing the balls onto construction paper to form pictures or designs.
  - Turning over cards, coins, counters, or buttons, without bringing them to the edge of the table.

## Autism:

*Autism is a developmental condition which affects how people perceive the world and interact with others. The needs, abilities and difficulties of autistic people range very widely, so the support each child needs will be specific to them. Autistic children may or may not have learning difficulties, and although they will have some degree of needs relating to communication, these vary widely.*

- Autistic children tend to respond well to a structured environment, a familiar daily schedule and routines. In school this often includes: clear labelling of the environment; a visual timetable using pictures or symbols; routines for transitions (e.g. music, songs and gestures for tidying up and changing activity); and if needed, a schedule board to sequence activities (see: [https://www.suffolklearning.co.uk/suffolklearning\\_images/users/Early\\_Years\\_Team\\_CYP//UsingNowandNextBoards.pdf](https://www.suffolklearning.co.uk/suffolklearning_images/users/Early_Years_Team_CYP//UsingNowandNextBoards.pdf)) Many of these strategies can also be extended to home learning.
- Give warnings and preparation for changes and transitions (e.g. five- and one-minute warnings), including the use of count-downs and timers.
- Set realistic goals for learning, with 'learning breaks' for relaxing activities.
- Use timers (e.g. digital or sand timers) to show how long an activity has left (whether it be a learning activity or learning break for instance). Small sand timers are handy and come in different time amounts (they are available on Amazon for under £5).
- Make expectations clear and specific.
- Reduce distractions and temptations! For an extra motivator, the child might earn some extra time on a console for completing tasks for example.
- Provide checklists of tasks for the child to tick off when they are complete.
- Allow the child some say (if possible) in the content of their work. For instance, can they include a favourite computer game character in their story?
- Repeat learning to help the child to retain it, as well as applying learning to different contexts (e.g. applying maths learning to real-life scenarios such a shopping trip).
- Provide learning activities which can be completed with a suitable degree of independence.
- Provide access to tactile, physical and practical resources and activities to support learning. For instance, physical objects and materials to support their comprehension of stories.
- Use sensory interests to engage and motivate the child, such as paints, fiddle toys and 'messy play'.
- Resources such as Social Stories and Comic Book Conversations can be very useful: <https://www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/social-stories-comic-strips.aspx>
- Power Cards are a useful way to promote routines, social skills and behavioural expectations, and use a child's personal interests to motivate and engage them. More information can be found here: <http://autismcircuit.net/tool/power-card>

## Further information and resources:

- <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/help-children-with-send-continue-their-education-during-coronavirus-covid-19> (home learning support)
- <https://www.dyslexia-assist.org.uk/for-parents/what-can-i-do-at-home-to-help-my-child/> (dyslexia)
- <https://www.tes.com/news/5-ways-support-pupils-poor-working-memory> (working memory)
- <https://www.familyeducation.com/school/fine-motor-skills/fine-motor-skill-development-tips-parents> (fine motor skills)
- <https://www.autism.org.uk/about/family-life/parents-carers.aspx> (autism)