



Soft Skills for a Brighter Future

"TRAIN THE SEN SPECIALIST"



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of the European Union

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SEN Toolkit Project

The SEN Toolkit aims at improving provision of inclusive practices and identification strategies for teachers in mainstream classrooms in Europe that include learners with category B special educational needs.

The project involves 6 European partners including experts in special education needs, learning design and teacher training.

Our aim is to build a better world for everyone to live in, one classroom at a time.

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The partners



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02

This guide

The final way that we reach our beneficiary of the SEN Toolkit project is by creating support for teachers who teach students with category B special educational needs in mainstream classrooms with general support needs.

In order to do this, it is very important that teachers identified for support roles have access to a collection of coaching and mentoring techniques to enable them to support students, parents and other teachers in their schools / localities.

This guide will also help to tackle negative stigma around special education needs and ensure a longer-term positive impact, which will be essential for tackling early school leaving.

This learning guide focuses on building coaching capacities for SEN SPECIALISTS. Soft skills, like coaching, motivation, questioning and emotional intelligence are covered and will help specialists to acquire the ability to not only to help with their specialist knowledge, but also to help other teachers to fully understand the students general support needs, create rapport with it and thus, create a more inclusive classroom.

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03

Soft Skills & SEN

The importance of soft skills has grown dramatically over the past years. In the labour market it has been highlighted as being a distinguishing factor for employment and companies are more than ever beginning to value soft skills as a key factor in the equation. The teaching of soft skills in the context of SEN is also now beginning to become an important aspect of teacher-pupil interaction.

Based on the concept of competence, it assumes the operationalization of a set of knowledge and attitudes in a specific situation in order to achieve specific results. In turn, the concept of soft suggests the opposite of hard, hard skills referring to technical skills and soft skills to personal and social skills.

The challenges of the teaching career today can be more easily overcome by teachers qualified in the field of soft skills, in addition to the technical skills that are inherent to it, thus being able to effectively manage their daily tasks in challenging contexts, such as the one presented today to special education.

Let's take a look at some soft skills and describe how they can serve to deal with SEN students and improve classroom interaction and behaviour:

Self-esteem

- Use self-esteem enhancement exercises, for example, praising positive compliant behaviour, tactfully ignoring inappropriate behaviour.
- Acknowledge the pupil's strengths, focus on achievement, and encourage outside interests.
- Set realistic targets and expect success.
- Discuss difficulties with the child, reassuring him that you understand the problems are not linked with laziness, carelessness etc.

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Active listening

It's important for any person to be an active listener. This is done by paying full and unbiased attention to what the other person is saying and wanting to understand the other person completely.

Listening to your student and understanding not only their needs but also how they perceive the world around them, makes a big difference in the relationship between you and your SEN student.

But you can also teach them to be active listeners which will help them understand others better as well as the world around them.

Resilience

Resilience is the ability to live a good and socially accepted life despite difficult circumstances. It helps a person to deal with difficult situations in a positive way.

Important for resilience:

- personality: self confidence, cognitive abilities, intelligence, positive focus, emotional self control
- family/friends: healthy relationships, warmth and support from family and friends
- external: encouraging school environment, teachers that care.

The community around the child has a big influence on their subjective experience of the learning difficulty. Low expectations from parents and teachers result in lower results and less coping mechanisms.

EI and the spectrum

Being "on the spectrum" can make it difficult for individuals to recognize emotional cues, anticipate emotional needs, or sometimes empathize in general.

When a student has difficulties with empathy, a strategy to help them is to break the actions down into small, concrete steps.

These include pausing before responding, restating what someone said to show you understood them and greeting people when you see them. Initially, you might have to script these interactions, including how to greet people.

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Your student can keep a journal of these scripts and make a habit of looking over them regularly, responding emotionally to situations in socially acceptable ways. This will help them to:

- permitting, delaying, and self-censoring spontaneous emotional reactions
- emotional self-awareness
- emotional self-evaluation and adjustment
- regulating “mood swings”

Keeping an “emotions diary” to record situation-response patterns can also be of help.

Cognitive Empathy

Cognitive empathy can be taught to children with autism, according to research published in the Journal of Applied Behavioral Analysis.

The study used puppets or dolls to role-play situations that elicit empathetic responses and used a token system to reward the expected empathetic response. Over the course of several sessions, subjects learned how to demonstrate empathy using appropriate words and gestures.

Further research shows children with autism can be taught empathy using modeling, prompting, and reinforcement to respond to another person's emotions with appropriate phrases, tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures.

Hyper-systemizing Theory

According to the hyper-systemizing theory (Baron-Cohen 2006), vehicles whose motion is determined only by physical rules (such as vehicles that can only go back and forth along linear tracks) would be much preferred by children with autism over vehicles like planes or cars whose motion could be highly variable, moving at the whim of the human driver operating them.

In vision neuroscience, this relates to the distinction between physical-causal/mechanical motion (Michotte 1963) versus animate/biological motion (Premack 1990; Castelli et al. 2000). The former requires intuitive physics (Wellman & Inagaki 1997; Saxe et al. 2004), while the latter requires intuitive psychology, in particular the ability to detect others' goals, desires and intentions (Baron-Cohen 1995).

Researchers therefore created a children's animation series, The Transporters, based around eight characters who are all vehicles that move according to rule-based motion. Onto these vehicles they grafted real-life faces of actors showing emotions.

The study they have reviewed (reported in detail in Golan et al. in press) investigated the effectiveness of individual use of The Transporters animated series (with parental support) over a four-week period. The results show that use of the DVD led children with ASC to improve significantly in their emotion comprehension and recognition skills on tasks including the emotions presented by The Transporters: from the same level of ability seen with the ASC control group at time 1 to a level that was indistinguishable from the typically developing group at time 2.

Teaching social and emotional competence

In several countries, there are a large and growing number of SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) programmes offered to schools. Typically, these programmes concentrate on managing emotions, setting positive goals, and increasing social and self-awareness. Relationship skills and decision making may also be included. While they vary in scope, the programmes tend to include both elements for developing teachers' professional competencies and classroom-based activities for students. But do they work?

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With funding from the Jacobs Foundation, a systematic review of research was done looking at SEL programmes, drawing upon studies conducted over 50 years and including children from preschool to grade 12 (around age 17-18).

The review analysed the effects of social and emotional learning programmes in schools on achievement in three subjects: reading (57,755 pupils), mathematics (61,360 pupils), and science (16,380 pupils), selecting only the 40 most methodologically rigorous studies.

While the evidence showed that the SEL programmes improved the children's performance in these subjects, the effects of the different approaches varied widely. There was great disparity in the quality of the studies, and it appears that different study designs may produce different results – for example when comparing quasi-experimental studies to randomised controlled studies. There is also evidence that some of the approaches to teaching SEL that have become popular over the last few decades might not be as effective as policymakers and schools may believe.

Transferable skills

The concept of transferable skills is intertwined with that of soft skills, which are defined as “personality traits, goals, motivations and preferences that are valued in the labour market, at school and in many other fields”. Personal skills enable individuals to manage their own personal attributes, improve performance and sustain interpersonal relationships with others.

Some transferable skills are presentation skills, leadership, communication skills, resourcefulness and creative problem solving, attention to detail and collaborative working. Many of these skills are particularly hard for SEN students but yet are of vital importance in real life and their future careers.

The teaching of transferable thinking and learning skills is commonly emphasised in professional guidance. Effective teaching strategies may include the use of ‘procedural facilitators’ like planning sheets, writing frames, story mapping and teacher modelling of cognitive strategies, although for quality and independence in learning it is crucial to extend these technical aids with elaborated ‘higher order’ questioning and dialogue between teachers and pupils.

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Conclusion

Soft skills are the everyday interpersonal skills such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving, and adaptability enable one to express ideas, plan, organize, understand directions, and get along with others.

Soft skills are far more important than pure academic and technical skills training for success in today's society, especially for special needs students who may struggle in the area of social and emotional development.

Helping SEN students now with their soft skills and their interpersonal development can greatly help their chances of success now and in the future.

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SEN & Emotional Intelligence

Defining Emotional Intelligence

It is now widely accepted in academic circles that the development of social and emotional skills greatly promotes positive behaviour and more successful learning.

Emotional intelligence is known by many names: personal and social development, social skills development, emotional and social competence, emotional and social wellbeing and emotional literacy. I will refer to it simply as EI.

The Cambridge Business English Dictionary (Cambridge University Press) defines EI as “the ability to understand and control your own feelings, and to understand the feelings of others and react to them in a suitable way: Emotional intelligence is as important as academic intelligence.”

Read that last line again. Let it sink in...

Basically, a person who is emotionally intelligent is able to:

- identify their emotions (this is the first and foremost step!)
- manage their feelings according to the given situation
- control their negative emotions and impulses
- know how to interpret and deal effectively with the feelings of others
- think of solutions to challenges and conflictual situations
- successfully overcome the difficulty facing them, which, in turn, produces feelings of satisfaction
- self-motivate, driven by these feeling of satisfaction
- create positive social interpersonal relationships

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Let's look at the relationship between EI and SEN students

As mentioned above, one of the most important roles of EI is to help us react to challenges and emotionally conflictual situations. For a SEN student, EI is like a GPS, guiding them around obstacles by helping them evaluate situations, putting the situations and contexts into perspective so they can decide on the best course of action.

SEN students often have no words for their emotions so they get frustrated and act out negatively to others. Their emotional vocabulary is usually very poor - they are aware of the myriad of emotions coursing through their body but do not have the tools to identify and talk about them. It is highly likely that they perceive their academic failure as a general lack of competence, seeing themselves as less intelligent than their classmates, less worthy, which adds to their low self esteem and can lead to social and behavioral problems.

SEN students are extremely sensitive to both internalised and externalised problems. Internalised problems are emotional experiences like fear, depression, anxiety and self-loathing, to mention a few. Children that internalise their problems struggle with showing and sometimes even identifying their emotions. This leads to internal turmoil that usually goes undetected.

Externalised behaviour is clearly demonstrated in conflictual situations with other people, both classmates and adults, be it teachers or parents. Typical behaviour of a student with externalised problems includes aggression, rule breaking, disruption and disobedience. These children are unable to control their emotions because they have no filter. Externalised behaviour is often, understandably, seen as a major problem needing disciplinary action. This causes many SEN children to enter into a vicious negative feedback loop:

The world around them (in this case, the classroom) is a threat to them, which creates a defensive reaction, which makes the world (classroom) an even bigger threat to them.

EI in the Classroom

All students are unique, SEN or otherwise, and EI training will help all students in your class adapt and adjust to the emotional ups and downs of everyday school life. Teachers who used to deal with mischief and temper tantrums are now sometimes faced with violent confrontations. Emotional intelligence is a tool that can help in the inclusion of disruptive learners and create a more peaceful learning environment.

Developing emotional self-regulation skills and conflict resolution skills in your classroom will help your SEN student (and all your students) to respond emotionally to situations in a socially acceptable way. They will learn emotional self-awareness and self-evaluation and adjustment and how to self-censor spontaneous negative reactions and cope with mood swings.

Consider these facts for a moment:

1. SEN students have significantly more behavioral problems than non-SEN students.
2. There is usually a significant difference between the EI of SEN students and their academic results.

It seems clear that developing EI in the classroom will positively affect both learning and behavior. Schools and teachers play a key role in developing social and emotional skills such as self-awareness, how to manage feelings and cope with negative emotions, motivation, interest, empathy and interactive social skills, all focused on and developed with the cooperation of students and, ideally, the parents as well. Children that are given EI training are more empathetic, better team players, less stressed, less frightened and nervous, less aggressive and have more fun at school. As a result, their academic results improve.

Some things to keep in mind in the classroom:

Being able to talk about the challenges they are facing and the feelings they are experiencing helps SEN students develop emotional intelligence.

Emotions can manifest themselves in many different forms such as crying, worrying, fidgeting, sulking, headaches, stomachaches, aggressiveness, etc.

The emotional vocabulary of most SEN students is very poor. They strongly feel the emotions in their body but they just don't have the tools to talk about them (this was worth repeating)...

It calms the SEN student's mental anguish to know that their feelings are perfectly normal and that there are names for all the feelings that they are experiencing. It not only lessens anxiety but it also gives them a confidence boost when they can understand what happens to them

Teaching EI skills in the classroom will not only help the SEN student succeed academically and socially, it will open doors for them to grow up and become well-adjusted successful adults!

Some of the benefits of developing EI in the classroom

Teaching emotional intelligence in your classroom empowers SEN students to:

- Identify their emotions
- Understand and accept their emotions
- Take responsibility for their actions and responses
- Respect other people's emotions
- See other people's emotions, both positive and negative, as important feedback for keeping them on the right path.
- Accept reality and face challenges with a more positive attitude
- Consciously choose the content of their self-talk, thinking and speaking more positively about themselves, their classmates, and their school and home environment, and enjoying more positivity and happiness.
- Avoid being carried away by their emotions
- Not giving up when faced with challenges and setbacks due to their disabilities.
- Learn how to create more rewarding experiences in their life
- Improve social relationships through improved empathy and an understanding of the emotions of others

Tools and Activities

Prepare an emotional evaluation template to use when a student is experiencing strong core emotions. It may include emotional self-awareness and self-evaluation questions and protocols.

Encourage and help your SEN student to keep an emotions diary to record what the trigger situation was that caused the negative emotions, how they responded and if they can see any patterns in their behavior. They could use stickers and colours to make it fun.

Set up classroom meetings where conflicts can be cooperatively resolved. Hold Kangaroo courts. Brainstorm solutions. Encourage everyone to participate.

Help with conflict resolution by using role plays to prepare them for conflictual situations. Think of a potential real-life problematic situation and assign roles. Ask the class what emotions each role might be having and discuss the reasons for the conflict. Brainstorm solutions and collectively choose the best one. If you do this regularly, the SEN student and the other children will be more prepared when problems do arise.

A Final Thought

‘Students who are anxious, angry or depressed don’t learn; people who are in these states do not take in information efficiently or deal with it well ... when emotions overwhelm concentration, what is being swamped is the mental capacity cognitive scientists call ‘working memory’, the ability to hold in mind all information relevant to the task at hand’ (Daniel Goleman 1995).

Effective Communication

Communication with your students is very important. Not only to teach them new things, but also to elicit information and to create rapport. It's probably the most important skill that will determine the success in your relationship with your students. It's therefore important to analyze the quality of your communication skills.

What is effective communication?

According to Wikipedia, effective communication is a process of exchanging ideas, thoughts, knowledge and information such that the purpose or intention is fulfilled in the best possible manner. In simple words, it is nothing but the presentation of views by the sender in a way best understood by the receiver

It's important to start with acknowledging the fact that any act of communication involves, at least, two persons:

- the person who expresses the message (sender)
- the person that receives (and interprets) the message (receiver)

We have to understand that, many times, the receiver does not always interpret the message exactly the same way that the sender interprets it.

And with SEN students, this "interpretation gap" can get even bigger.

Quick reflection:

- **When was the last time you had a "lost in translation" moment?**
- **Were you the sender or the receiver?**
- **How did it make you feel?**
- **What was your part of responsibility in this situation?**

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The keys to effective communication

Take this into account when you want to communicate effectively:

1. **Be positive.** Do you remember the last time you communicated with a negative person? How did it make you feel? Encouraged? Motivated? Probably not. One of the first keys to effective communication is to enter conversations with a positive, upbeat mindset. You don't have to be overly giddy or a motivational speaker, but if you want to be an effective communicator, you can't be a downer.

2. **Be a listener.** Effective communication starts with good listening skills. In his book "7 habits of highly effective people" Stephen Covey says: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." This does not mean that good listening skills will keep you from expressing your own ideas or opinions. It just means you shouldn't start there. Pay close attention to what's being said and make others feel heard and considered. You can be an even better listener by practicing "active listening." You can do this by occasionally repeating key phrases said by the other party. By doing this, you demonstrate that you are engaged in the conversation.

3. **Be empathetic.** To be an effective communicator you need to be able to understand the feelings of those around you. Empathizing means both understanding and relating to someone else's feelings. This will build rapport between you and your student and pave the path for effective communication.

4. **Focus on nonverbal communication.** Some studies show that nearly 90 percent of emotional communication is transmitted nonverbally. Developing an awareness of your body language and tone of voice will improve your communication skills. Maintaining eye contact, limiting hand gestures, and having good posture go a long way in communication. Including gestures such as pointing and nodding can help SEN children understand messages better. You may need to exaggerate some gestures or prolong them, especially in the beginning, for better comprehension. In general, children like responding to exaggerated nonverbals with their own movements and gestures. When combining verbal and nonverbal communication, the receiver (or student) receives both auditory and visual cues, which will enhance their understanding.

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5. **Manage your own emotions.** For effective communication and your own personal wellbeing, it's important to manage your emotions and express them appropriately in context. Allowing strong emotions to unnecessarily creep into a professional setting can lead to poor communication and conflict. You can develop a filter for negative emotions and modulate how to express your thoughts and feelings to those around you. It's also vital to know what's appropriate and what isn't to express in different contexts.

6. **Ask for feedback.** Remember when we said; "the receiver does not always interpret the message exactly the same way that the sender interprets it"? Effective communicators know the solution to this problem. And that's asking for feedback. Ask the receiver what they've understood from your message and analyze if that's what you meant.

And if it isn't, don't blame the receiver. It's probable that you didn't communicate well enough the first time and now you have to explain again, but differently.

Important!: Do not ask "did you understand", but rather "What did you understand".

By asking "Did you understand?", the child will most likely (and instinctively) respond with a simple "Yes", even if they didn't understand it. But also if they DID understand it, their understanding might still differ from what you actually meant.

If, instead, you ask "What did you understand?", they will respond with their understanding. And now, you will be able to analyze if that aligns with what you meant to communicate in the first place.

Communication with SEN student

Your students have great potential in life. And this includes your SEN students as well. But the majority of those SEN students have already faced many negative situations over the years, mostly combined with education and their learning process.

Therefore, effective communication is a fundamental part of working with SEN students, as without it they're unlikely to be able to fulfil their full potential.

Some SEN children will have highly complex needs, and this can make communicating with them a challenge.

However, it's possible to adapt your teaching and communication style and methodologies to best suit their needs, something that should be factored into any lesson planning and activities.

Fortunately, there are numerous tools and resources available to aid SEN teachers, meaning you can find an approach that best suits the pupil you are supporting.

Some students might require tools or flashcards to communicate effectively, while others may look to nonverbal methods – each child will have a different set of needs, meaning a range of communication strategies will likely be needed.

Tips for communicating with SEN Students

TIP 1: Be specific

It's important to be very specific when giving instructions or asking questions. Instead of just telling your students to do a certain task, tell them exactly how you want them to do it, what you want the result to look like and by when you need it done.

When asking about your student's past holidays, try to focus on one aspect of it. Children remember important events and the emotions linked to it, so try to ask questions such as, "Where did you go on holiday?", "With whom did you go?", "What did you do?", "What did you like most?".

The answers to these specific questions can even spark further conversation with your student or encourage classroom discussion or activities.

TIP 2 : Use modelling

We shouldn't expect children to be able to communicate perfectly without our guidance. Good communication behaviour can be learned and taught.

While, for instance, they might understand what it means to do the turn-taking that's needed to have a conversation with someone, some children need further support to properly put this into practise.

That's where modelling can make a difference. Through watching and listening to you, your student learns what to do and how to do it. When they see you talking to a classmate or another teacher and notice how you take turns and don't interrupt the other person, they can model that behaviour.

Tip 3: Constantly provide explanations.

At the beginning of the day, explain what you will be doing in class today. Maybe also explain why you will do certain activities. This helps students put the learning into context. It will also help them get organized.

You could also ask for their help and say, "we need this list of things to do in class today, in what order shall we do it?". This will help their organizational skills.

As the day unfolds, repeat the list of activities that you said that you were going to do. This helps students to realize what they've learned and done so far but also enhances their sequencing skills.

Tip 4: Change it up a bit.

While you certainly want to begin communication with simple and easy to understand language, you will eventually also want to expand your student's vocabulary.

Challenge your own vocabulary by mixing your words a bit. Start small. Use "the other words" from time to time. Rather than telling your student to start working on the next task, tell them to move onto the next task. Or, when changing activities, instead of saying they can do something else, maybe say they can start engaging in a new activity.

Expansion of vocabulary challenges the thought process as well as helps a child feel confident in communication skills.

Tip 5: Use pictures.

Like flashcards, pictures can challenge the memory. Associating still pictures with words can help the child associate words with the real world. Use pictures with single items rather than those with busy backgrounds. As the child learns, you may introduce more challenging scenery or pictures in which children may identify several objects.

Tip 6: Realize and respect their differences and limitations.

Challenging children can give them opportunities to succeed, but we can also overdo it. The child will let you know when he or she is ready to move on to another adventure in the learning process.

The role of music

Music can be tied into learning in many different ways and can provide a means for pupils with SEN to communicate without explicitly needing to use words.

Movement can help pupils to focus and acts as another means of self-expression, providing an alternative for those who are unable to say exactly what they want to.

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Psychological Consequences

There are three things to consider when thinking about SEN and psychological consequences.

The first being the causes; the second being the effects; the third being our responses. We shall examine these, in turn.

Causes

Research has shown that negative teacher-peer perception of neurodiversity, learned helplessness, and bullying leads to trauma. It's important to look at these causes individually.

First, negative teacher-peer perception.

Studies demonstrate that negative perceptions of dyslexia coming from teachers and school peers leads to negative psychological consequences, and this even comes as a consequence of the very label itself.

One study (Pollack, 2005) noted that when students internalised different understandings of their neurodiverse conditions, they experienced different psychological outcomes; and the attitudes and language of those around them had a significant effect on this. Four understandings were identified:

- "Patients" – students looking at their neurodiversity as a "medical condition" or something that needed to be "treated" experienced negative psychological consequences.
- "Students" – students looking at their neurodiversity as a "learning difficulty" experienced negative psychological consequences.

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- “Hemispherists” – students looking at their neurodiversity as a difference, in brain structure or information processing had positive psychological outcomes.
- “Campaigners” – students looking at their neurodiversity as a political issue, causing them to campaign for more appropriate teaching and learning provision, also had positive psychological outcomes.

Next, **learned helplessness**.

Learned helplessness involves patterns of responses characterised by the avoidance of challenges such as schoolwork, negative feelings, and the collapse of problem-solving strategies when obstacles arise. It often is induced by repeated experiences of failure, even when this repetition is not frequent, and when this failure is compared (often unconsciously in a neurodiverse student’s mind) with the majority of the class “getting it right”, the negative aspects of this will often become magnified.

There are three elements in learned helplessness: contingency, cognition, and behaviour. Contingency refers to a response being contingent upon an event; cognition is how the student understands this; and behaviour is what happens when learned helplessness is manifest, even without the initial event-cause. In simple terms, a baby elephant may be chained to a pole and unable to escape (contingency); she may understand this (cognition); and as she gets older and grows into a large, powerful animal capable of breaking the chain with one easy movement, she continues to act as though she cannot escape the chain (behaviour).

In schooling, where an education environment is structured to favour “neurotypicality” over “neurodivergence”, SEN students will quickly experience instances of failure (contingency), leading to a belief that schooling is hard (cognition). Finally, the students will be unable to complete them successfully (behaviour).

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Third, **bullying**.

Studies (such as from the Universities of Toronto and Yale) have shown that neurodivergent students are between three or four times as likely to experience bullying as their peers. Throughout much of the EU, overall bullying rates can be between 10-25%. Where neurodivergent students are three to four times as likely to experience bullying, it may be conservatively assumed that these students face something in the region of a 40% chance of bullying, and probably more. According to Britain's All Party Parliamentary Group for Dyslexia and other SpLDs, 48% of parents said their children had been bullied because of dyslexia. According to the National Bullying Prevention Center bullying is especially reported in classrooms, washrooms, corridors, play areas, on buses, and online. The trauma associated with being bullied extends into school, home, and adult life.

Effects

There is a traceable and strong link between teacher-peer perception, learned helplessness, and bullying, and trauma, substance abuse, and self-harm / suicide.

Trauma.

Trauma is characterised by the American Psychological Association, among others, as an ingrained harmful response to any situation that is or was physically, psychologically, or emotionally threatening; as a response to events that cause feelings of helplessness, diminish their sense of self and their ability to feel the full range of emotions; and as damaged psychological well being resulting from events which exclude you through shame, alienation or stigma.

Key words we may take from this include: ingrained, harmful, damaged, helplessness, shame, alienation, and stigma. According to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Dyslexia and Other SpLDs, 84% of children feel anxiety, and 88% low self-esteem. because of dyslexia.

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Substance abuse.

Yates (2013) found that 40% of substance abusers had dyslexia; other studies (such as Lesser, 2021, Jhanjee, 2015, corroborate these figures. But other studies have indicated perhaps 50% in youth substance rehabilitation programmes being dyslexic. ADHD is up to 10 times more common among adult alcoholics than it is in those without ADHD. Among adults being treated for alcohol and substance abuse, the rate of ADHD is roughly 25% (see Watson, 2020). Similar reports have shown that those on the autism spectrum are at significantly higher risk (perhaps three times as high) of substance dependency than their non-ASD counterparts, as a means of coping with anxiety (see Lalanne et al, 2015).

Self-harm and suicidal ideation.

Self-harm, and suicidal ideation, are probably the most extreme manifestations of the psychological consequences of inappropriate education on SEN students. But while they may be extreme, they're not uncommon. Dr Sharon Kempf found that 63% of dyslexics had feelings of helplessness, 85% had self-harmed, 50% had had thoughts of suicide, and 42% had attempted suicide. Dr Neil Alexander-Passe had found similar statistics, with around half the subjects of his own study exhibiting suicidal ideation. The American Association of Suicidology reported that teenagers with dyslexia are roughly four times more likely than non-dyslexic teens to seriously contemplate suicide.

Autistic children and adults face similar challenges. One report (from Autistica.org.uk) states that autistic adults are nine times more likely than non-autistic adults to die from suicide. In another study conducted by Horowitz of the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health, 13.7% of 314 ASD people screened positive for suicide risk.

Responses

There is a simple strategy that all stakeholders should familiarise themselves with: Predict. Prevent. Alleviate.

Predict.

Stakeholders should all learn to understand what actions, behaviours, and environments are most likely to trigger psychological trauma. One way to learn is through constant, open conversation.

Participants should learn each other's triggers and boundaries. Questions should be gentle and interested, but clear and open (not closed questions). It should be established that communication is mutual, and that no one person should feel under any pressure to "be the provider of information". The keys to positive communication are listening, not being judgemental, empathising, sharing, showing that people take each other's issues seriously, building trust, and not breaking confidences.

Moreover, it should be possible for teachers, school heads, etc., to learn the basics about SEN and map these facts on to potential psychological and emotional triggers. Where teachers understand about the potential for sensory overload, they should discuss among themselves and with other interested parties how to mitigate against this, for instance; where they understand the difficulties that long reading tasks might cause, they should plan ways to break these tasks up. Class and individual plans should be used to facilitate this.

Prevent.

There are two methods of distress-prevention that can be acted upon immediately: removing the triggers of distress, and removing the causes of the triggers.

To lessen negative perception, discussions should be held about which language and attitudes come across as negative. Staff meetings can be convened where attitudes towards dyslexia as being a "learning difficulty" are challenged and compared with dyslexia as being a "learning difference"; or a meeting can be convened where "mild to severe autism" talk is challenged and replaced with discussions about how stakeholders can learn to communicate better with one another.

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To combat learned helplessness, the first two aspects of learned helplessness may be tackled: contingency and cognition. Where there is a demand for all students to “finish the chapter by...”, and it is noticed that some students find this particularly challenging, then remove the pressure for all students to finish the chapter in the same way by the same deadline. Tackling the cognition element is equally straightforward: open conversations about things that have been difficult, acknowledge that there’s no judgement in this, and share the discovery that the things that might have been difficult in one task are not the same things that make future tasks seemingly impossible.

Bullying may be tackled in a number of ways. channels to speak to mentors and “bullying buddies” can provide an outlet for students. Kindness and empathy can be factored into the teaching of every class. Opportunities for genuine connection between students can be forged, safely, which can turn the bullied student from an “object of bullying” into a human being with his / her own skills, abilities, and sense of value.

Gateway behaviours – micro-aggressions that can easily become full-blown bullying – should also be identified and tackled at source. These may include (but are not restricted to) eye rolling, non-inclusive body-language, and ignoring, excluding, or minimising another student’s involvement or contribution in games, tasks, etc.

Removing the causes of the triggers is more complex because it involves looking at the roots of behaviours rather than the behaviours themselves. For instance, the roots of the attitude that autistic students are “unable to communicate properly” could be that there is a culture where the teachers have been trained to teach by requiring students to “get into groups and discuss...”. The roots of a dyslexic’s struggles could come from the ingrained conception that “the point of school” is to pass the exams at the end of school. Ultimately, one of the chief causes of distress at school for SEN students is that the very structures of the education system can feel non-inclusive and alienating, and merely fixing the surface problems still leaves them feeling lost, confused, and uncomfortable.

Alleviate.

If some negative emotional and psychological consequences have already crept in, it's important to be aware that there are professional, trained organisations who can help. These can – and indeed should – be accessed locally in each case, and can be found when looking online for “mental health charities”, or “confidential mental health support”. But the classroom teacher has a role to play in this process too. Below we look at ten things that can help alleviate psychological and emotional struggles in the school environment.

Spot the “Tells”. Stress and anxiety shape behaviour and may make students appear angry, depressed, uncooperative, or distracted. Students are still children, most of the time, and have not developed coping strategies as well as adults.

Build Relationships. One of the manifestations of psychological trauma, as we have seen, is a feeling of alienation. The students who are in most difficulty will need most care taken over their relationships, including their relationships with their teachers.

Safe Environments. Students who suffer from learned helplessness feel helpless in those environments in which learning is hardest. Students who are affected by the attitudes of those around them will feel this most intensely in classrooms where those attitudes are inescapable. Setting rules and building bonds within these environments is key to tackling distress.

Predictability. Uncertainty can lead to anxiety, and those students who are already at risk of anxiety will feel less comfortable with uncertainty. The teacher can help by creating an environment where timetables, routines, etc, can all be used as frameworks for creating a predictable (not rigid or unchangeable) environment.

Self-Awareness. It is common for students to feel they are “fine”, even when they aren't. Teachers and school heads should include self-awareness, self-observation, and self-acceptance in their curricula without “adding it as a lesson”, by including such things in classroom discussion topics about already-prescribed subjects, and in homework.

Model Acceptance. Through use of stories, discussion, and the utilisation of the curriculum (how many trauma-informed topics can be found in Shakespeare and Schiller, in History lessons, in Religious Studies, in Art, etc.?), the teacher has ample opportunity to demonstrate levels of acceptance – of others, of themselves, and of traumas themselves.

Reward, Don't Punish. Traditional “corporal punishment” and “detentions” are only the tip of the iceberg. Pointing out publicly that a student has got something wrong, asking students to repeat work they may find exhausting and extremely difficult, or keeping students back during breaks, are all forms of punishment. Instead, teachers should consider ways of openly and authentically rewarding students for the good that they do.

Encourage Breaks. A simple way of relieving overwhelm is to encourage students to take breaks when needed.

Create a Buddy System. This doesn't have to be a case where a teacher points out a struggling student and assigns this student “a helper”. Structures can be created where students support each other. And when a student who needs support is given the opportunity to support others, the benefits that come from this can be enormous.

Don't be Afraid to Talk. Students who struggle psychologically may simply need to be able to talk. Teachers should always be available and proactive in asking whether students are available; and may wish to create support groups where anyone can talk to others.

Coaching & Mentoring SEN Students

Almost all publications on the word “coach” relate it to business, work and large organisations. But in recent years the term is beginning to be applied to other fields, such as education. It is assumed that the educational process is a "personal" commitment to **help the person to build a life plan**. This involves the recognition and development of personal skills, the acquisition and appropriate application of new learning, the recognition and adoption of values, the formation of self-concept, the establishment and realisation of dreams, ideals and goals and the construction of new knowledge based on self-knowledge.

Coaching uses different **techniques and tools** to modify, create, reinforce and strengthen patterns of thought and behaviour, eliminate limiting beliefs and negative emotional tendencies. All of this is delivered to the student's needs in a personalised way with constant one-to-one coaching. Therefore, we will focus on building coaching skills to **help teachers fully understand the overall support needs of learners**, strengthening relationships with them and thus creating a **more inclusive classroom**.

The coach can also act on the context: teams of teachers, tutors and family to support the growth of pupils with special educational needs in their tasks. The school coach becomes an optimal mediator between the environment with its demands and the individual with his or her possibilities, difficulties and limits.

The role of coaching

Teacher learning and development is at the heart of school improvement and is a vehicle for raising achievement and attainment.

When teachers' learning is informed by their assessment and understanding of pupils' learning, they can begin to adapt their practice, which can lead to real differences in outcomes.

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Coaching can provide a means to achieve these and other key principles and thereby improve teachers' learning. Coaching is a form of collaborative learning and can therefore be an important dimension of teachers' professional learning in schools.

The figure of a coach in the school for SEN pupils is enormously positive. A coach is neither a psychologist nor an educationalist, but has to know something about both subjects. Nor is a coach the tutor, whose intervention is usually applied to the academic level of his or her students, who are usually a whole class of 30-36 students. The coach works directly on people's deep desires, to awaken them and point them in the direction of realisation, turning them into goals. He or she seeks the success of the person in terms of personal self-realisation.

Because of the same objective, it would be very interesting to apply coaching to SEN children who are usually aggravated by having to be integrated into structures that are not well regulated for this type of pupil. Coaching would be a service for students with special educational needs, which would compensate for the distance between their personal reality and the demands of the environment with personalised training.

Coaching experiences; self reflection

The following questions are useful to check levels of actual and potential "buy-in" for coaching.

Investigating them will help you to recognise perceptions and experiences of coaching.

- Are you interested in participating in coaching?
- How are your experiences of coaching currently evaluated formally or informally?
- Is there evidence that teachers perceive it as beneficial? If so, in what way?
- Are teachers who have received coaching interested in becoming coaches?
- Do teachers experience any stress in participating as a coach or coachee?
- Are there teachers who have worked in other schools who have useful experience of coaching, and how can others learn from this?

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Basic aspects of the teacher/coach

1. Guide

He/she is no longer the one who maps out the path and provides all the answers, but a figure who acts as a guide, i.e. helps the learner to create his/her own route to the goal.

2. Active listening

The teacher-coach lives in continuous learning and improvement thanks to the feedback from his or her students. Of course, he/she is a person who should not be afraid to make changes.

3. Is flexible

Their weapon, the ability to adapt. They know how to get the most out of changing situations and educational contexts.

4. Supports

The teacher-coach accompanies and supports students to gain self-confidence and to become, little by little, self-sufficient.

5. Asks questions

The teacher-coach asks questions instead of making statements, provides tools so that the students can reflect and generate answers.

What do we need to consider in the classroom?

Being able to talk about the challenges they face and the feelings they experience helps SEN students to develop emotional intelligence.

Emotions can manifest themselves in many different ways, such as crying, worrying, fidgeting, bad moods, headaches, stomach aches, aggression, etc.

The emotional vocabulary of most pupils with SEN is very poor. They feel emotions strongly in their body, but do not have the tools to talk about them.

Teaching EI skills in the classroom will not only help the student with SEN to succeed academically and socially, but will open doors for them to grow into a successful and well-adjusted adult.

Educational Coaching Techniques

- **Educational coaching** is based on patience and respect for the pace of each student. The aim is for the individual to achieve the goal, we cannot be impatient with the achievement of the goal.
- **Focus on the process** and not on the results. Coaching is a method that pursues objectives but focuses on the process and through the process the objectives are achieved.
- **To apply coaching**, we must maintain fairness in the classroom and at home, and treat all children equally.
- **Support.** Coaching is about supporting the learner, not indoctrinating. Support means believing in him or her and helping him or her to discover his or her strengths in order to further his or her development.
- **Active listening.** It consists of listening to what they tell us in words and what they want to tell us, making the other person realise that we are listening to him or her.
- **Personalisation.** Coaching is based on the idea of the individuality of each person and therefore it is a unique and personal process for each one.
- **Attention to needs.** Coaching has to be especially aware of the needs of each of the learners in order to be able to attend to them.
- **Development of the whole person.** Coaching aims to improve performance and for that purpose it attends to the whole development of the person, not only to those aspects related to the more purely academic performance.

Motivating SEN Students

Success or failure of children with Special Educational Needs depends a lot on their motivational state. Motivation can affect a child's performance of learning skills, strategies and behaviors. SEN students suffer from emotional problems related to their learning differences such as depression and anxiety.

What is motivation?

Motivation is what gets us moving. One could say it's the combination of 2 words; MOTIVE and ACTION. Motivation is why we do things. And the stronger the motivation, the higher the probability of getting towards our goals.

Motivation is also what puts whatever we do in a certain context. And this is something that can be very valuable for SEN students. It is not the same learning Spanish because you "have to" by your teachers and parents, than learning Spanish because you will be going on summer vacation to the Costa del Sol and meeting a spanish friend.

It's therefore very important to find out what motivates your SEN (and not SEN) students, and to use that knowledge to your (and their) advantage.

Intrinsic or extrinsic motivation?

Motivation can be extrinsic or intrinsic.

If it is extrinsic, the motivation comes from the outside. For example, a student might want to get good grades to please her parents.

Intrinsic motivation is what comes from the inside. It's a drive from within. A student might be motivated to learn English so he can better understand his favorite (English speaking) youtuber.

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Whereas younger students (mostly primary school students) are still very much driven by extrinsic motivation, teenagers and adults need a strong intrinsic motivation if they really want to get the best results possible of any learning process.

Motivation and SEN

SEN students, like children who have dyslexia, frequently develop negative attitudes to reading and writing activities and sometimes to the whole process of learning.

They can often display difficulty in concentrating, difficulty in organising themselves, and sometimes they even develop skills in distracting the class and the teacher.

These are invariably manifestations of motivational difficulties. They are not motivated enough and try to avoid the task because they are terribly afraid of failure.

Any teaching programme therefore needs to adapt to these students and take special care of their motivational and emotional state.

Motivation strategies

Know what they like

One of the first things any teacher should do is to find out what gets their students moving. What “tickles” them and interests them. It could be sports, arts, a famous person, clothes, video games, etc. etc..

Once you know what your students like, you not only have shown a personal interest in them, but you can also use this information to your advantage and as a motivational tool.

Try to relate whatever they are learning to what they like. If you are teaching statistics, why not calculate last year’s statistics of their favorite football team? And if you’re teaching foreign languages, why not watch videos of their favorite youtuber or about their favorite subject?

Linking any learning to situations that your students can relate to will put it into a real life context for them, which will undoubtedly enhance their motivation to learn more.

Create reasonable goals

Creating achievable goals for students is a common activity for teachers, but did you know it can also motivate your students with learning differences? According to an article written by Dale S. Brown, speaker and author, setting goals is often a struggle for special needs students. She writes that it can be “hard for them to plan ahead, to start and stop what they wish to do, and to monitor their behavior.” She goes on to explain that, often, goals are imposed on special needs students that are unrealistic and unattainable. “The school system and society set goals for them — such as getting good grades and performing well on standardized tests — that challenge them in their area of difficulty. When they do not receive proper accommodation, they get discouraged and lose confidence.”

You can create realistic goals and expectations with your students using the SMART strategy. SMART is the acronym for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-bound. Developing SMART goals for students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) can help special education teachers “identify gaps in skills,” so they know where to focus their lessons with the students. With realistic goals and clear expectations, special needs students know what’s expected of them and that they can achieve success in the classroom.

Celebrate and remind achievements

When students are reminded of their accomplishments, big or small, it can encourage them to be successful at similar or more difficult tasks in the future as well as help raise their self-esteem. According to an article from nonprofit organization GreatSchools, telling students they came up with a great idea during a lesson or applauding them for staying focused during class can give them a boost in attitude.

David A. Sousa’s book, “How the Special Needs Brain Learns, Third Edition,” stated that raising a student’s self-esteem on its own doesn’t directly correlate to increased academic performance. However, when their self-esteem is tied to a sense of personal responsibility in academic achievement, there is more evidence of greater motivation in students with special needs.

It’s also important to focus on the process rather than the outcome. When a student has worked very hard on an assignment, praise them for their effort. Even if the outcome is full of mistakes. You should, obviously, raise those mistakes as well, but put the focus on the effort.

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Be creative without losing the structure

Special needs students can lose motivation if they see the same lesson plan and structure week after week, so it can be helpful to get creative with your lessons and tailor them to specific classes. It is, though, important to always keep a structure around the daily work schedule.

You could, for example, within the segmented lesson times, change up the lesson plans. Sometimes, providing a change of pace can help freshen things up for the students and keep them excited and motivated to keep learning at school.

This probably sounds more difficult in theory than it actually is in practice. As another example, when giving a lesson with a writing assignment, you could discuss the SOAPSTone strategy. SOAPSTone stands for Speaker, Occasion, Audience, Purpose, Subject, and Tone, and it breaks down how to effectively craft a composition. This great strategy enables students to be creative while organized, and come up with their own stories within the structure of a writing assignment from a teacher.

Make it fun

Creating a fun learning environment will help motivate your students to learn. Try turning the lesson into a simple memory game, trivia game, singing game or involve one of their interests (from when you asked about what they like). You could also get creative and tie in some type of art project (i.e. Pinterest). You can even use technology that is both fun and educational.

Some ideas or inspirations:

Use a reward chart

Reward charts are very powerful, visual ways for students to see their success. Use a reward chart to award stickers for anything from good behavior or academic progress. When your student has collected enough stickers to fill the chart, they are rewarded with some type of treat. Some ideas might be choosing a game to play in class, no homework for today, a special treat, etc. . Reward charts can be as simple as a dot-to-dot chart, a sticker chart, or even a tally sheet. Just make it simple to understand.

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Utilize Technology

Just as technology has been used to narrow the achievement gap among traditional students, it can also help special needs students perform better in school.

By utilizing the technology at their disposal, special needs students are provided more choices on how to complete assignments in the way that works for them best. They can write, record, make a video, create an art project, create a game, a mind map, etc.

One teacher says: “Students are given the freedom to demonstrate their knowledge in their own way and tend to feel more invested in learning because of the choices they are given.”.

Motivation starts at home.

Studies from different cultures show that the more parents are involved in their children's education, the more likely the children are to succeed.

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Guiding Parents

Parents are usually the first to notice the early signs of special educational needs. They notice that their child is developing differently than children of the same age. Maybe there were differences at birth or perhaps these were observable later.

Although teachers are the experts in education, we all have to understand that parents know their child best. Experts can be well acquainted with the type of disorder that the child has, to know the symptoms or the way of functioning in teaching and extracurricular activities in an educational institution, but cannot know the daily functioning of the child better than the parents.

Parents are the first educators. They're the first reference group for any human being and the basic nucleus of society as a whole.

The family is where the first interactions take place, the first bonds and ties are established, and it is the environment where the child acquires habits and tools to interact with other people and where he/she gradually learns the rules and behavioral guidelines.

Of course, there are differences in how both teachers and parents "see" the child, because the child behaves differently in different situations, learns faster or slower, is more open or reserved depending on the situation and circumstances. Precisely because of the different information parents have about the child and different views of the child's involvement and progress, cooperation between teachers and parents is crucial.

Every child is a story of itself. Maybe parents don't always know how to explain a child's progress, the way they learn and communicate. But it's also true that maybe teachers don't always ask questions in an understandable and approachable way and don't communicate appropriately with the student's parents.

Through better communication and active participation, parents become stronger and better informed which leads to a shift from the passive role of the aid recipient to the active role of participation in their child's education.

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Managing emotions

When dealing with SEN students it is crucial to manage one's own emotions. Parents need to understand that their own emotional state can make a huge difference on how their child faces their learning differences.

Some tips that you can give parents are:

- Be optimistic and supportive for your child
- Ask for help (either professional help, peers or at school)
- Talk to someone. Talking to other parents with SEN children can help a lot.
- Don't see SEN as a problem. See it as a condition. The same condition as being tall or small and blond or brunette.

Communicating with parents

Before you start your communication with parents, it's important to take into account certain aspects:

- Critically review how you work with parents
- Offer an open communication
- Provide practical strategies to support learning at home
- Tailor communications to encourage positive dialogue about learning
- Offer more sustained support where needed
- Ask them how they feel about the situation
- Make them understand that you're all "on the same team"

When you communicate with parents, start by assessing the needs and what would help them to support the learning of their child.

It's crucial to communicate very carefully and, at all times, avoid stigmatising, blaming, or discouraging the child's parents.

It's important that, in all your communications, you try to focus on building the parents' efficacy in the process. They need to understand that, although you are the teacher, they are equal partners and can make a huge difference for their child's learning.

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Communication between parents and the school should be open and honest, for example, by sharing expectations about the child from both the parents as well as you, as the teacher.

If you have several SEN students, plan carefully for group-based parenting initiatives, such as specific workshops. These meetings can be very powerful for the parents to share their experiences, fears and emotions with other parents who share a similar situation.

If needed, consider offering regular home visits for children with greater needs. This can be an effective approach for parents that struggle to attend meetings, and for building strong and long lasting parent-school relationships.

Supporting the child at home

Many parents will ask; “what can we do to help our child?”. Here, we will look at some ideas, activities, strategies and inspirations that you can share with the parents of your SEN students:

- Assess how often the parents read with their child. Are their books available in the house that suit their level? Is reading seen as something fun to do in their family?
- Make reading and learning to read an enjoyable and playful activity. Minimize the amount of correcting and maximize encouragement of even the smallest gains.
- Encourage things that the child excels at, and praise them. This could be sports, theater, art, science, debate team or anything else that makes him feel good at something.
- Schedule work hours, use labels to improve spatial management.
- Arrange for the child to look after people in need to develop empathy and compassion. Maybe they can become volunteers or they could join the parents while volunteering.

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- Encourage home learning activities, such as playing with letters and numbers. It's even better if the letters and numbers can be touched, moved around and have different colors. Or letters and numbers can be made by the child from construction games.
- While reading together, have conversations about the book and celebrate any small reading success
- Create regular routines and good habits for homework. But parents should not directly assist in their child's homework. They support them and encourage them to set goals, plan and manage their time. This will help them to regulate their own learning and is much more effective than direct help with homework assignments.
- Whatever you do, start with small goals that are easy to be reached. It will give them a feeling of accomplishment and will be a great motivator to go forward.

Parent - child communication

A healthy and effective communication between the parents and the child is crucial for the child's development.

It's usually the parents who explain to the child what learning difficulties are. When doing so, the child needs to walk away from that conversation with the knowledge and conviction that it has nothing to do with their intelligence, nor with their worth as a person. And it has to be absolutely clear that people around them will not love them less.

Parents need to be very vigilant about their own emotions and what they show to their child. When children see that their parents struggle with their learning difficulties, they will feel there is something wrong with them. Parents need to control the situation and always adopt a positive attitude towards their children and their learning difficulties.

It's important to not focus on the flaws of the child, but to celebrate their strengths and to applaud their efforts over their outcomes.

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School parent relationship

Make sure to check regularly (also with the parents) if the extra support and the adapted curriculum is working for your student. It might be necessary to make additional changes due to emotional and social situations. In those cases, families and teachers have to work together to provide the best environment for the child.

Schools and teachers need to design the communication between themselves and the parents. Poorly designed, or ad-hoc, communication will most likely be reactive, while a well designed communication strategy will be moreover proactive, and thus effective.

Well-designed school communications can be effective for improving attainment and a range of other outcomes, such as attendance.

Examples for good communication are:

- weekly text messages sent from school to parents,
- accompany them by short, termly letters

The impact from such approaches may appear small at the beginning, but they are generally low cost, straightforward to introduce and very effective.

In general, messages are more effective if they are personalised, linked to the learning process of the child, and promote positive interactions by, for example, celebrating success. Do not only write to parents when their child has done something wrong. Also, or even above all, write to tell them about their child's successes. It will boost the child's confidence but also the parents' trust in the school.

Communication should be made two-ways. Make sure that parents can also contact you, as the teacher. And also consult parents on actions to be taken during school time. Many parents say that they have never been consulted about their child's education.

Personalized communication between the school and parents will only benefit all parties involved, and most of all the child.

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Barriers in communication

Despite the efforts of the school (and probably the parents as well), there might still be barriers that prevent effective communication between the school and the parents.

Here are several conflict situations and possible solutions;

- Conflict with work hours and childcare commitments: offer different and flexible times to meet and communicate. Try to choose the most suitable communication channel. Maybe consider a home-visit
- Accessibility: why not organize a virtual meeting?
- Use of professional jargon or inaccessible language: at all times, teachers should avoid the excessive use of professional jargon. We are not in the conversation to show the parents how much we know. We're here to help their child and to do it together with them.
- Uninterested staff: some teachers or other staff members are (or at least seem) uninterested in the difficulties that SEN students face. Although they might be good teachers, they should never be the ones to be involved in the communication with the parents. It's important that the parents (and the child) experience a welcoming atmosphere.
- Uninterested parents: some parents might seem uninterested in their child's learning. In this case you might want to ask help from a member of staff who can relate to the parents. Or recruit other, more involved, parents to act as ambassadors. Sometimes, parents might be intimidated by talking to teachers or other school staff and other parents may soothe that feeling.

At the heart of all of these is building relationships of trust

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Inclusive Teaching Methods

In order to develop a **dyslexia-friendly learning environment** and to ensure that every child achieves success, especially in the early phase of their education, the inclusive programme has to be designed and adapted. Therefore, teachers ought to

- use personalised materials which are of interest to students;
- use positive reinforcement strategies;
- adopt realistic, feasible and well-balanced targets.

One of the inclusive teaching methods is a **by-pass strategy**, devised to alleviate or 'by-pass' a child's difficulties or learning struggle. This is mainly a method for a pupil to tackle the curriculum in spite of the obstacles they might experience. This strategy involves:

- personal word books/dictionaries;
- personalised lists of main subject vocabulary;
- information technology such as laptops or tablets;
- special assessment/examination plans;
- special arrangements for note taking etc.

Learning styles to be deployed to the benefit of the students:

- **Reading** – encourages visual learning attitude.
- **Writing** – enforcing kinaesthetic style of learning. Writing down the main points helps jog their memory.
- **Speaking** – stimulating auditory senses. Auditory learners like to hear information and as a result they perform and memorize better.
- **Reducing the load** - this requires thinking skills. Highlight the key words and cluster the associated ideas, go for mind mapping, use coloured pens to point out the essential facts and number them.

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To ensure the appropriate programme to a child with dyslexia, some actions are worth considering. Accommodating or catering for dyslexic children can include:

- Allowing extra time on tests
- A quiet space to work
- The option to record lectures
- The option to give verbal, rather than written, answers (when appropriate)
- Elimination of oral reading in class
- Exemption from foreign language learning

The attempt to understand how SEN students feel and see the world around them is one of the most significant endeavours.

Students with SEN confess that they get lots of different thoughts at the same time. They find it confusing and are always in trouble with someone. They feel unpopular and know that sometimes they are difficult to like. From the student's point of view, nobody seems to understand them.

Teachers ought to consider acquiring these attitudes:

- Invert the position by looking at the issues of SEN as not so much a problem but as an opportunity.
- Regard the student who is easily distracted as having high levels of awareness and observation
- Think of the restless student as being energetic and lively
- When the student with ADHD throws a tantrum, see it as a sign of individualism and independence
- If the student forgets things, consider that they've been absorbed in their own thoughts
- If the student starts interrupting, think of it as enthusiasm to contribute

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- When pupils' performance is sloppy, look for signs of effort despite difficulties
- Look on a student's apparent selfishness as single-mindedness in pursuit of goals
- Strive to reward good development and ignore the development that you don't want

Teachers involved in special education should:

- use their training to determine the specific needs and abilities of the students under their care, in order to develop appropriate learning plans.
- develop Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Based on their evaluation of needs and abilities, Special Education Teachers collaboratively develop IEPs for each student.
- implement the IEP, adapt lesson plans or develop new ones to cater for their children's learning needs. Sometimes these are executed individually, other times to small groups or a whole class.
- assess students' performance and discuss it with parents. A vital part of the Special Education Teacher's job is to keep parents informed and updated on their student's progress etc.

Depending on emotional bonds SEN students form with their teachers and peers, the ease and success of academic achievement varies. The support provided to these students is of paramount importance, as the teachers need to be aware of their proneness to anxiety and depression. So the teachers' support, apart from the curriculum, is also vital in helping them manage extreme emotions.

The influence a teacher has on the life of their students is invaluable, a few simple words of acknowledgement, small adjustments in methodology and sympathy in order to connect with the student can awaken hope, motivation, interest and self-confidence, cornerstones to succeed in life.

In contrast to this, as misunderstandings, punishment and reprimand become more frequent, reciprocally the feelings of incapability, hopelessness and inadequacy heighten.

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Additional actions to take:

1. show interest in your student
2. trust your student's abilities
3. be involved in your student's learning journey
4. be flexible
5. recognize your student's efforts and problems
6. learn from your student. There are no 2 students alike
7. work together with your student

School also needs to be a place where you learn important lessons for life, such as self-conscience, self-control, empathy and the art of listening, problem solving and collaboration.

To achieve successful individualisation of learning the teacher must have good professional and expert competences. This primarily applies to their methodological competence and methodical training, but also competencies specific to an inclusive approach, unlike other approaches.

Since a teacher has a variety of roles, their leadership and teaching style differ. Inclusive teaching is a relatively new didactic concept, unlike a traditional approach. The basic goal of inclusion is to create opportunities for better learning for all students which will be best suited to their individual differences.

Teachers, special needs assistants and support staff are central to the success of inclusion. It is therefore vital that all staff and personnel involved in an inclusive environment possess the skills and knowledge and competences to deal with the challenge of inclusion. It is equally important that staff work together effectively as a coherent team, to ensure that all students are effectively included in the educational process.

By promoting the vision of inclusion among staff and other stakeholders in the child's education we are more likely to achieve the goals of inclusion. These goals and results could have a tangible outcome visible in the form of staff bulletins, staff training, school publications, and at parent or staff meetings.

Having a positive attitude towards inclusion is only one aspect of teachers being successful in an inclusive environment. Staff training and continuous professional development ensure and ease the process of dealing with issues surrounding SEN.

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Resources & activities for SEN students

It's important to be able to use a variety of resources and activities with SEN students. Many of the resources and activities mentioned here do not only work for SEN students but for their neurotypical peers as well.

Cover your eye

Playing games where learners have to cover their left eye while putting pegs on objects, manipulating them using fine motor skills, or drawing using their right hand helps build cross-lateralisation, focus, eye-tracking, and visual concentration. The dextral element in such exercises is crucial – simply asking children to cover one eye risks creating ocular laziness (where the eye doesn't have to work hard or actively fixate), and does not systematically practise any of the skills we are trying to build.

Hand Clapping

Paired hand-clapping games such as “patty cake patty cake”, throwing and catching exercises where each student is assigned a letter and students throw balls among themselves according to which letter is being called out, and even games where children draw letters in the air and their partners have to guess what those letters are, won't feel like literacy exercises, but employ multi-sensory techniques which allow the brain to coordinate so that reading becomes easier, time management can become easier, and focus / concentration can increase.

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Games of Snap

Games of Snap! will not feel like “reading exercises”, but they practise the grounding for reading while developing a sense of proprioception, play, and cooperation. They also help develop working memory as the child looks to, remembers, and compares images on one card with images on another. It also practises triadic awareness (a skill involved where a number of students are aware of an object, and they are aware of each other being aware of that object, and they are aware that the other students are aware of them being aware of the object – a key aspect of social skills building).

Broken Telephone

Games of “broken telephone” can help children develop phonological awareness, as they listen to and concentrate on the syllabic, phonemic, and rhyming aspects of words in order to pass them from one person to another. They also help practice pronunciation. The game can be developed so that it’s not just a word or a sentence that is being passed from one student to another, phonemic “separating” and “blending” can be practised through this method, asking one student to whisper a word into another student’s ear, then that student has to split that word into its phonemes (c / a / t) when whispering it to the next student; who then has to blend the phonemes into the original word (cat).

Lego

Building words using Lego is a wonderful multisensory “kinaesthetic” way of engaging children with vocabulary. Different coloured bricks can act as an aid to memory.

Crabbing

“Crabbing” across the floor. “Crabbing” is the act of crawling when a child puts her left hand and her right leg forward, then her right arm and her left leg forward, alternatively. This helps brain cross-lateralisation, which develops the child’s ability to

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sequence letters and phrases, especially when combined with the child chanting phonemes of morphemes with every forward movement, until they complete a word or a phrase.

Dominoes

Dominoes / word dominoes teach sequencing, working memory skills, and the ability to “blend” (numbers, spots, letters...). It’s also a great way to practice proprioception and fine / gross motor control.

Buzz!

“Buzz!” (sequencing) – this is a game where students sit round in a circle, and simply count. The first student says “one”, the second student then says “two”, the third says “three”, and so on. Once a round or two of this has been established, so people know what they’re doing, the teacher introduces the first rule: every time a student says “seven”, or a number with seven in it (seventeen, twenty seven, seventy, seventy one, seventy seven...), instead of saying that number, they say “buzz!” and the order of counting is reversed. After a few rounds where the students are comfortable, another rule is introduced (the teacher can introduce whichever and however many rules she wishes). The standard second rule is: retaining the first rule (numbers with seven in them), every time a student says a number which is a multiple of seven (fourteen, twenty one, twenty eight...), they also say “buzz!” and the order of play is reversed again. The next rule could be numbers that add up to seven (sixteen: $1+6=7$; 25: $2+5=7$...), which cause a “buzz!” and a reversal of play; and so on, with the teacher adding new rules (such as “prime numbers”, or “numbers featuring repeated digits, like 11, 22, 33, 44, etc) for as long as she wishes. This practices a number of skills: especially working memory, sequencing, executive function, listening, reversals, interpersonal interaction, etc, in a fun and silly way.

Statues

“Freeze!” / “Statues” (concentration / stillness / proprioception). This is another game that teaches proprioception, interpersonal skills, etc, but doesn’t involve speech.

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Students walk around and one child shouts “Freeze!”. All the other students have to stand still, and the first one who moves is “out”. This also teaches concentration, stillness, focus, and gross motor skills.

Scrabble

Scrabble teaches planning, it teaches prediction, it teaches organisation, it teaches spelling, and it practises fine motor control and stillness. It can also be used to help students who have communication challenges “speak” to each other through the scrabble tiles, through building words.

Guiding

Guiding blindfold games. Students guide each other, with the guided student being blindfolded, through a maze (of chairs, or boxes, perhaps). This practises left and right awareness, it allows students to follow instructions, it helps with concentrating, it helps with forming and giving, and then receiving and decoding, simple-to-complex instructions, and it practices interpersonal skills in a guided, structured environment. If (and this is something to be careful about with ASD students) the teacher feels it’s safe, there can be an element of touch to this game, but it is not necessary.

Memory Games

Memory games (covering objects with a cloth) are excellent ways of practising working memory, sequencing, organisation, fine motor skills (for the one arranging the objects to hide, change positions, and then remove one by one), and guided interaction. Students who struggle with speaking socially can give their answers about “what’s missing” (etc) by writing or drawing pictures, and this is gradually built upon by drawing pictures with writing words, then writing words, then speaking the words with the pictures, and finally speaking the words without pictures). It also helps students gradually build up “rapid naming” skills, object recognition, and an understanding of special relations.

Complementary Activities

If you work with SEN students then you'll need all the help you can get. Creative, hands-on exercises help SEN children to practice a range of skills from communication and socialising to maths and word association.

Here we propose some extra activities and tips you may implement in the SEN classroom and which can bring added value and lots of benefits to your students. In some cases, putting into practice these activities and tips can be challenging and may need to have a whole school approach before implementing.

Sensory Room

This room is used to help pupils learn to respond and react to different stimuli as a complementary beneficial activity. We use it to teach cause and effect and how to use switches to make things happen.

The room can be used to set up different environments and different levels of control. We also use it to create environments which act as a stimulus for imagination and for some pupils this is a great motivator for story writing. The idea is to get the students in the mood by creating the proper environment for them to flourish.

Hydrotherapy Pool

An excellent facility, available to all pupils who need access to it to maintain or improve their physical skills. The warm water environment enables pupils to relax and develop their physical skills and body awareness. It also has a sound and light switch system which can change the whole atmosphere and enable learning of physical skills alongside communication and sensory development.

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Now let's turn to some activities ready for classroom implementation:

What Time Is It?

This is a fun maths exercise that the whole class can join in with. Hold up a clock face with a time on and get the children to put their hand up if they know what time it says. Count to three and then ask them to shout out the time all at once. Give one point to each child who guesses correctly!

Next, pass the clock onto one of the children who repositions the hands and perform the exercise again. Do this as many times as you like. Alternatively, give each child their own clock face and clearly state a time. Ask them to move the hands on their clock faces to match the time you've said.

Give two points if they get it right and one point if they're 'close' – this way everyone gets points and no one feels left out. If you work with children with Special Educational Needs then you'll know how important it is to include creative classroom activities as part of your weekly lesson plans. Creative, hands-on exercises help SEN children to practice a range of skills from communication and socialising to maths and word association.

Shopping List

This maths exercise incorporates everyone's special interests, which is great if you have SEN children with very intense or specific hobbies. Ask each child to name their favourite item and then write these on the whiteboard – write the word and draw a small picture to represent it if you can.

Next, give every item on the shopping list a price (make this as easy or hard as is suitable) and hand out a pretend 10 euro note (or equivalent in other currencies) to each child. Ask each child in turn – if they wanted to buy their favourite item with their note, how much change would they get? Ask them to shout it out, write it down or come and draw the figure on the board depending on their level of ability.

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Guess the Emotion

This activity will help students to improve their recognition of body language and facial expressions. Write a list of some common emotions – e.g. happy, sad, angry, afraid, bored, pleased – and then stand in front of the class where everyone can see you and read out the name of the first emotion on the list. Pull a face and use your body language to show this emotion and ask the children to copy you.

Once you've been down the list, ask a child to recreate one of the actions you've just performed (or do this again yourself if the children are reluctant) and see whether the rest of the group can guess which emotion it is based on solely through body language and facial expressions. Go around the class and ask each child to act out an emotion in turn.

Roll the Dice

You may wish to download and print a 3D cube model for this. Then draw a physical action on each side – e.g. draw a simple stick man and show him jumping, waving, standing on one foot, etc. Write the name of each action below each image in clear letters. As an arts and crafts exercise you could ask each child to make up the 3D cube by sticking each side together, otherwise you can construct them yourself before class.

To play the game, take it in turns as you move around the classroom and ask each child to roll their dice and then copy the action that it lands on. This will help your SEN children to identify and correlate words, pictures and actions.

Follow the Leader

This easy activity helps children to learn how to understand and follow simple instructions. To begin the exercise, ask the children to stand in a circle. Start the activity with yourself and, speaking clearly, ask everyone to complete an action, e.g. hop on one foot, pat your head, shake hands with a partner or clap your hands.

After they have completed the action, ask the child to your left (using their name to get their attention) to call out an action for everyone else to complete. Take it in turns clockwise around the circle so that each child has the opportunity to call out an action and can easily see when it is, and isn't, their turn to be the speaker.

Show and Tell Your Partner

This traditional classroom activity is perfect for SEN children, particularly those with autism. Ask each child in your class to bring in an item that's special to them, whether it's a toy, book or another object. Next, ask each child to think of three facts about their special item – you could ask them to write these down or simply keep them in their heads.

Put the children into pairs and ask one child in each pair to tell the other their three facts. When they've finished, the other child then says their three facts. Emphasize the importance of listening carefully as their partner speaks. This activity is less daunting than the usual show and tell where the child is required to stand and speak alone in front of the entire class – something that can be quite difficult for SEN children to do.

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