

BODY TALK

Afroza Talukdar explores some of the educational implications of dyspraxia and suggests some simple strategies that could make a dramatic difference to outcomes for pupils with this much-misunderstood condition



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Since the turn of the 21st century, scientific and medical literature has been peppered with case reports of children without an identifiable medical or neurological condition, who appear physically and intellectually ‘normal’, yet lack the movement competence necessary to cope with the demands of everyday living. These children used to be described as ‘clumsy’; the condition is now widely referred to as dyspraxia, or Development Coordination Disorder (DCD) – the latter being an umbrella term that embraces the former, which is best described as a motor learning difficulty, characterised by impairment in the ability to plan and carry

out sensory and motor tasks. We know that in people with dyspraxia there is ‘an immaturity in the way that the brain processes information, which results in messages not being properly or fully transmitted!’ What we do not know is what causes this.

Research has shown that, on average, around 6% of pupils have some degree of dyspraxia. It’s reasonable to assume that at least one pupil in an average class of 30 will have motor co-ordination difficulties. Boys are four times more likely to be affected than girls. Many people with dyspraxia also have a spectrum of difficulties with cognitive process that influence attention and concentration, time management, short-term memory, and organisational skills; in a learning environment, it can help enormously to have a range of intervention strategies to address these difficulties – it should be noted, though, that it is essential to assess ‘the whole student’, including the pupil’s own insight and parental perspectives, in order to provide optimum learning conditions.

Attention and concentration

Learners with dyspraxia may often appear not to be listening, and get distracted easily. They may be fidgety, moving constantly or rocking. The main reasons for their attention and concentration difficulties are due to an inability to: balance and fix their bodies to sit still for an extended period of time; filter out unwanted sounds and movements; and process and follow a sequence of task instructions.

STRATEGIES

- Be realistic and consistent about your



approach and expectations

- Provide a quieter 'work area', away from auditory and visual distractions
- Provide short and structured tasks with legitimate short breaks
- Encourage learners to adopt the correct sitting position at their desks
- Provide a 'fidget object'

Time management

It is hard for pupils with dyspraxia to judge how long tasks will take to complete, or how much detail is required. They may think they have worked for hours, when in fact it has only been a short time. They often feel frustrated as a result, because their written work does not reflect their true abilities.

STRATEGIES

- Provide more routine activities – the familiarity of tasks will help to build confidence and provide opportunities for over-learning
- Use a clock in the classroom and refer to the time regularly
- Provide 'timed tasks' using a sand timer, buzzer or alarm clock
- Encourage pupils to estimate how long a task will take to complete, then check how long it actually took
- Be clear and explicit about the detail of tasks you expect within a set time

Short-term memory

Students with dyspraxia often have difficulty following instructions. They may not be able to remember everything you have asked them to do, perhaps only retaining the first or last part. This is due to slow verbal information processing skills, and problems remembering the sequence of verbal instructions.

STRATEGIES

- Provide short, simple instructions with visual support for key points
- Deliver instructions slowly and clearly
- Encourage pupils to repeat instructions back to you in their own words
- Gain a learner's attention by attaching his name to an instruction or by making eye contact (be sensitive, however, as some pupils aren't comfortable with the latter)
- Provide a task planner – a visual reminder of the sequence of tasks, breaking the instruction down into manageable, and memorable, chunks

Organisation

Although they may try harder than their peers, pupils with dyspraxia often struggle with basic organisational and self-help skills. They may lose personal belongings, forget to bring their PE kit or homework, and regularly miss deadlines, due to immature and disorganised motor planning, poor motor memory, information processing difficulty and an underdeveloped sense of timing.

STRATEGIES

- Provide extra time for learners to plan, organise and complete their work
- Keep a pupil's belongings in a particular place
- Provide a 'buddy' system to support learners to organise tasks/equipment/homework, and navigate around the school
- Provide checklists of equipment needed
- Liase regularly with parents about homework/coursework, submission dates etc



ABOUT THE EXPERT

AFROZA TALUKDAR IS SEN ADVISORY TEACHER FOR A LOCAL AUTHORITY, AND AUTHOR OF DYSPRAXIA/DCD POCKETBOOK (TEACHERS POCKETBOOKS, £7.99, AVAILABLE DIRECTLY FROM TEACHERSPOCKET BOOKS.CO.UK, 0800 028 6217), FROM WHICH THIS FEATURE HAS BEEN ADAPTED.



REBECCA NEWTON IS 23 YEARS OLD, MARRIED WITH ONE CHILD, AND A FIRE FIGHTER. SHE WAS DIAGNOSED WITH DYSPRAXIA IN Y5, AT THE AGE OF NINE

"I feel that my dyspraxia was managed very well at the comprehensive secondary school I attended. My SEN support teacher saw me weekly, and although it was my dyslexia that took precedence, she took time to do the exercises that my occupational therapist had suggested for me. She also was very supportive of me taking part in sports and music, which acted as supporting therapy. The head of PE was also a karate and Ju Jitsu instructor and started an after school club – I attended this and then joined a local class. Because my PE teacher knew about my dyspraxia he was very patient and supportive. Non-contact fighting benefited my spacial awareness (eventually), and my coordination improved, although I still got left and right muddled. I was also encouraged to play drums in music class – my gross motor skills were much better than my fine motor skills, and still are. The good thing was that in my 'practical' subjects teachers were informed and understanding but on the negative side, in 'academic' subjects I was seen as clumsy and boisterous. I have very bad handwriting, for example, and was often picked up on this. All in all I think my school did a good job of supporting me with both dyslexia and dyspraxia. But I do think that that the two conditions should be treated more equally. More information about dyspraxia shared among all members of staff would have caused me less embarrassing times."