

Spotting the Symptoms of Specific Learning Difficulties in Class

Including children with special needs can present major challenges to mainstream schools. Senior school staff and teachers have to decide how to provide for the diverse and complex needs of all children in their classes. Additional information is being discovered all the time about different types of special needs and the remediation required. Of course this information is welcomed and helpful, however a class teacher has up to 30 individual children's needs to meet and wants to enable every child to meet their potential and has only 24 hours in a day!

The whole process of formal diagnosis can be lengthy and sometimes a whole year can be wasted waiting for an assessment. Schools have found it beneficial to use the information provided below, about certain disorders and difficulties, to create checklists. These checklists can be used when a teacher is concerned about a pupil to help them ascertain what the problems might be and provide support whilst waiting for a more formal diagnosis, if this is felt to be necessary and beneficial.

Checklists

Schools I have worked with have used the signs and symptoms I have provided and put checklist boxes by the side of each one. As soon as the class teacher becomes concerned about a child she/he can record (or tick) specific behaviours on the checklist. Very soon it should become apparent where there are clusters of ticks as to what the possible learning difficulty might be. The school can then make parents aware of their concerns and also can begin to provide appropriate support

Spotting the Symptoms of Specific Disorders in Class

Symptoms of Dyslexia

Dyslexia is the commonest cause of learning difficulties for children and young people in schools and colleges. The word comes from the Greek meaning 'difficulty with words.' The main symptoms include difficulty with writing and spelling, and often with reading and working with numbers. A dyslexic person may also have problems putting things in order, following instructions, and may confuse left and right.

The most common characteristic is that people have difficulty reading and spelling for no apparent reason. The person may be intelligent, able to achieve well in other areas and exposed to the same education as others, but is unable to read at the expected level.

Despite intensive research, the exact causes of dyslexia still remain unknown but it is thought to often be inherited as it usually runs in families. Dyslexia can also be acquired through early hearing loss such as 'glue ear'.

Symptoms of Dyslexia

The following are symptoms of dyslexia. A person does not have to have all symptoms to be dyslexic and likewise a person having one or two of these symptoms isn't necessarily dyslexic. I have ordered the symptoms into ages to help you, however symptoms of 7 year olds may also be symptoms encountered by adults with dyslexia.

Pre-school

- Delayed speech – not saying any words by the time they are one and not really talking until they are two and a half or older.

- Problems with pronunciation and mixing up sounds in multi- syllabic words such as aminal for animal, mazageen for magazine.
- **Problems with rhyming words** (this is one of the biggest indicators) and learning rhymes.
- Difficulty with learning shapes, colours and how to write their own name.
- Difficulty with retelling a story in the right order of events.
- Lots of ear or throat infections
- Forgets names of common words or people
- Finds it difficult to throw, catch or kick a ball.

Primary School

- Reads below their expected level.
- Doesn't like reading books.
- Tries to avoid reading aloud in class.
- When reading aloud reads very slowly and often ignores punctuation.
- Often has difficulty separating sounds in words and blending sounds to make words.
- Can read a word on one page but doesn't recognise it on the next.
- When they misread a word it will often be one that looks visually similar, with the same letters such as 'form' and 'from' or change the sequence of letters in a word such as 'who' for 'how'
- Problems with reading a single word in isolation, where there are no picture clues or storyline to assist.
- When reading will often lose their place on a line or skip lines

- When reading a sentence or a story will often substitute word that make sense but doesn't look at all similar, for example 'car' for 'bus' or 'ship' for 'boat'
- Often misreads or omits small words, for example: and, the, as, of, from.
- Spelling ability is normally far worse than their reading ability.
- Spelling attempts can be bizarre.
- Regularly confuses certain letters when writing, such as 'd' and 'b' or 'u' and 'n' which is a classic symptom and relates to the whole problem that many dyslexics have with left and right.
- When writing 'b' or 'd' they will often use an upper case 'B' or 'D'
- Regularly writes words backwards, such as writing 'pot' instead of 'top.' Or transpose, for example 'left' for 'felt'
- Problems with grammar, such as learning prefixes or suffixes.
- Can learn words for spelling tests at school and achieve 10 out of 10. But a day later they misspell the same words in their free writing.
- Find copying from the board very difficult and will frequently lose their place and misspell words.
- Work is often very messy with many crossings out
- Has poor pencil grip with a tendency to grab the pencil.
- Writes slowly and handwriting poor
- Forms letters from the wrong place and often has trouble making the letters sit on the line
- There is usually a vast difference between a child's verbal ability and the quality of their written work.
- Most of the writing lacks even the basic forms of punctuation.
- They normally can't self-correct their work when proof-reading.

- Has trouble learning colours, days of the week, months of the year and how to write his/her name, their birth date
- Has problems with sequences like multiplication tables, today/tomorrow
- Have trouble retaining facts
- Has extreme difficulty in telling the time. They may manage o'clock and half past but anything else becomes too difficult for them.
- They will write some numbers backwards, for example 41 for 14.
- Poor concentration
- Unable to follow multi-step directions or routines. For example if you ask them to go upstairs, get undressed, have a wash and bring down a book, they will probably forget one of your directions (and not necessarily to wash!).
- Most dyslexics have significant problems in directionality, telling left from right

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Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism is a spectrum disorder, meaning that there is a wide degree of variation in the way it affects people. Every child on the autism spectrum has unique abilities, symptoms, and challenges. Children with autism spectrum disorders usually have particular communication and social characteristics in common, but the conditions cover a wide spectrum, with individual differences in: severity, age it starts, how many symptoms they show and how well the child can function

Every individual on the autistic spectrum has problems to some degree with social skills, empathy, communication, and the ability to be flexible. But the level of disability and the combination of symptoms can vary significantly from child to child.

The 3 most common categories of Autistic spectrum disorder are:

- Autism (the most severe of the three)
- Asperger's Syndrome (high functioning autism is the mildest of the 3)
- Pervasive Developmental Disorder

As the 3 autism spectrum disorders share many similar symptoms, it can be difficult to distinguish one from the other, particularly in the early stages.

By the time a child reaches school autism spectrum disorder will normally have been diagnosed, but not always.

Autism and Asperger's- symptoms

On the next pages are listed the signs and symptoms of Autism and Asperger's

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Symptoms of Autism

Autism is a complex brain disorder that affects many aspects of child development, including how a child talks, plays, and interacts. Early intervention makes a huge difference in the outcome of the disorder, so as a teacher, it's important to know the symptoms of autism and seek advice if you have concerns about a particular child.

Autism occurs with equal frequency across all races, ethnicities, and social classes. However, boys are three to four times more likely to have autism than girls and the siblings of those with the disorder are also at a higher risk.

The symptoms of autism vary widely, as does the severity of the disorder. There are 3 main areas that will be affected:

- **Social Skills** — impaired social interaction is the hallmark sign of autism and one that most people are aware of and associate with autism. Children with autism often appear to be in their own little world. They may have some or a significant inability to make eye contact. They often appear totally uninterested in other people and their surrounding environment. They have trouble engaging in co-operative play with peers, making friends, and understanding what others are thinking and feeling.
- **Communication** — Autism also involves problems with verbal and nonverbal communication. Spoken language is usually delayed in autistic children and may even be completely absent. Children with autism usually have trouble conversing freely and easily. Other

common symptoms involve odd or repetitive speech patterns, inappropriate facial expressions and gestures, and language comprehension difficulties.

- **Repetitive behaviour** — Autistic children often exhibit repetitive behaviours and narrow, restricted interests. They usually love to stick to their routine and are resistance to change. They can appear very confused and anxious if their routine is altered, even slightly (for example a change in the daily timetable or different seating arrangements within their classroom). They may develop obsessive attachment to unusual objects. Repetitive body movements such as hand flapping and rocking are also common.

Typical Symptoms

Verbal

- Slow to develop language skills.
- Has trouble expressing needs.
- Used to say a few words or babble, but doesn't anymore. Speaks with an abnormal tone or rhythm — may use a singsong voice or robot-like speech
- Can't start a conversation or keep one going
- May repeat words or phrases verbatim, but doesn't understand how to use them
- High pitched or flat intonation
- Uses very precise language

Social/Behaviour

- Avoids eye contact
- Doesn't play pretend games
- Reacts unusually to sights, smells, textures and sounds
- Are visual learners
- Doesn't seem to hear when others talk to him/her
- Some children with autism will also be very sensitive to their environment. For example: bright lights and noises including background noises
- The smell or feel of some materials can really upset some children with autism
- Children's facial expressions can sometimes look strange
- They often appear to ignore people
- They find it hard to empathise with other's feelings or discuss their own feelings
- They don't like to be touched or held
- They have difficulty socialising or playing with peers of their own age.
- They often stick rigidly to rules of a game and become very upset if others don't
- Other children find them different and hard to understand which can lead to them being isolated or bullied
- Many children will memorise scripts from a DVD or children's programme and repeat them exactly word for word with the same intonation as the characters.
- They take everything that is said literally and therefore do not understand sarcasm or idioms, for example "raining cats and dogs" or "out of the blue."

- When people talk to them they don't take any clues from people's body language or facial expressions as to
- They love routine and can become quite distressed if their routine is upset in any way
- They can become fascinated by a subject or an object

Repetitive behaviour

- Has difficulty adapting to changes in routine.
 - They develop rituals in play
 - Shows unusual attachments to toys or other objects.
 - Obsessively lines things up or arranges them in a certain order
 - Repeats the same actions or movements over and over again.
 - They perform repetitive movements like rocking or hand-flapping
 - They may walk differently. For example they sometimes walk on tiptoe
- They can develop routines or rituals that they have to go through

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Symptoms of Asperger's

Although there is a certain set of symptoms common to Asperger's, each case of Asperger's is unique and not everyone experiences the same combination of symptoms. The following list should help you to identify a child with Aspersers symptoms:

Social Interaction Difficulties

A person with Asperger's may have difficulty with the following aspects of social interaction:

- They want to socialise with others but don't understand how to interact.
- They do not interpret other people's emotions or social responses accurately in a group situation.
- They may not understand if an activity or conversation is boring or upsetting to another person.
- They may not understand how to initiate play with their peers or how to play by common rules.
- They have trouble with initiating and maintaining a two-way conversation. They may appear to *talk at* someone rather than converse with them.
- Conversation topics may focus only on their interests.
- They speak inappropriately such as talking too loudly or softly.
- They may not interpret facial expressions, body language or gestures.

- They will only engage in a narrow range of activities or talk about certain subjects.
- They may behave or respond to social situations in an unusual or inappropriate manner. For example, a child may smile when being “told off” or laugh at something sad.

Communication Difficulties

A child with Asperger’s syndrome experiences a number of communication difficulties. Communication problems can include the following symptoms:

- They may not make eye contact.
- They might make unusual or inappropriate gestures during conversation.
- Facial expressions are either absent or inappropriate to the conversation or situation. They may have facial tics.
- They might stand too close to a person during conversation.
- They may speak in a monotone voice, without expression or emotion.

Difficulties with Language Processing

A person with Asperger’s generally has a large vocabulary. However they experience problems with language processing. Difficulties may include:

- Trouble using language appropriately in social situations. They may also misunderstand common word meanings.
- They may use words in an unusual way.
- They don’t always understand the verbal speech of others or they may misunderstand the meaning of a conversation.
- They may have trouble making a decision or answering a question.

- They interpret most language on a literal level and miss abstract meanings. For example “pull your socks up” will often be interpreted in the literal sense

Cognitive and Motor Skill Impairments

Cognitive and motor skill problems are also common in Asperger’s. Typical cognitive and motor skill issues include:

- They cannot understand what others are thinking and feeling in social situations or in relationships.
- They have trouble figuring out how to solve problems if it is not part of their usual routine.
- They experiences difficulty with planning, implementing and completing tasks.
- They do not play imaginatively as a child.
- They require visual aids to help them with learning.
- They may have problems with both fine and gross motor skills. Such problems include learning to ride a bike, handwriting, cutting and playing ball games.

Sensory and behaviour Issues

Many children with Asperger’s have sensory weaknesses and may have unusual reactions to certain sights, smells, sounds or tastes. Sensory problems include:

- They might be hypersensitive to different sounds, particularly loud sounds. At these times they may cover their ears, cry out or attempt to hide
- They may react strongly to certain smells.

- They may not want to be touched and will jump if even a hand is put on them.
- They may not like getting their hands messy. They may act adversely to finger painting etc
- They may be sensitive to the smell or texture of certain foods.
- They prefer to follow a set routine and become anxious when the routine is changed or interrupted.
- They are intensely interested in a small number of subjects and do not like to engage in any other activities.

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Symptoms of ADD & ADHD in Children

Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) can be easily confused with a number of similar symptoms. For example it's normal for children to lose concentration easily, fidget and blurt out answers to questions. Find it difficult to settle, loses or forgets things. However, it may be that they have ADHD.

If a child displays a few of the symptoms of Add/ADHD it may just be normal behaviour caused by other difficulties. If they display a number of these difficulties then it may be advisable to ask for a second opinion

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a disorder that appears in early childhood usually by the age of 7. This condition makes it difficult for children to inhibit their spontaneous responses.

Facts about ADD/ADHD

- Not all children with ADD/ADHD are hyperactive. Some children are hyperactive but others may just lack concentration.
- Children with ADHD can often concentrate on activities they enjoy.
- Children with ADHD act impulsively. They do not necessarily mean or want to
- Sometimes drugs are the best treatment for ADHD, but not always. It can also be effectively treated through other methods such as diet

Signs and symptoms of ADD & ADHD

The 3 primary characteristics of ADD / ADHD are inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. A child may be:

- Inattentive, but not hyperactive or impulsive.
- Hyperactive and impulsive, but able to pay attention.
- Inattentive, hyperactive, and impulsive (the most common form of ADHD).

*Children who only have inattentive symptoms of ADD / ADHD are often overlooked, since they're not disruptive.

Inattentive signs and symptoms of ADD / ADHD

- Doesn't pay attention to details or makes careless mistakes
- Has trouble staying focused; is easily distracted
- Appears not to listen when spoken to
- Failure to complete tasks
- Has difficulty remembering things and following instructions
- Has trouble staying organised, planning ahead, and finishing projects
- Frequently loses or misplaces homework, books, toys, or other items
- Difficulties concentrating if there are any distractions around them

These children normally must have a calm, quiet environment in order to sustain attention.

Hyperactive signs and symptoms of ADD / ADHD

- Constantly fidgets and squirms
- Often leaves his or her seat in situations where sitting quietly is expected
- Moves around constantly, often running or climbing inappropriately

- Talks excessively, has difficulty playing quietly
- They try to do several things at one time and normally fail to complete any
- They cannot sit still and will fiddle with any items they can lay their hands on, tap their feet etc

Impulsivity signs and symptoms of ADD / ADHD

- Blurts out answers without waiting to be called on hear the whole question
- Has difficulty waiting for his or her turn
- Often interrupts others
- Intrudes on other children's conversations or games
- Limited self-control
- Cannot control their emotions and can become angry or aggressive with their peers
- Can be tactless and upset others with the questions and observations
- Can be very emotional and needy

In order to get an accurate diagnosis, it is important to have a full medical and psychological evaluation. As well as seeking information from people who know the child very well. Mental health professionals who can diagnose ADD / ADHD include psychologists, paediatricians, and psychiatrists.