



Thinking/Cognition

About thinking/cognition skills

Cognition is another word for thinking or understanding. It includes skills like how fast someone thinks, and their attention, reasoning, and problem solving. Teenagers with disabilities or developmental challenges may face challenges with some types of cognitive skills. These will vary depending on the teen. They may experience some challenges with how quickly they can think and their ability to understand. They might need information kept short and simple, and they may take longer to understand, think and respond. They may become tired quickly. New tasks can be harder for them to learn and so they might become frustrated. They may engage in challenging or disruptive behavior when feeling frustrated.

Students with developmental disabilities often have a unique profile of strengths and challenges in different areas of their thinking skills. They may show a great understanding of visual information, but need extra time to process information or have trouble concentrating for a long time. Each teenager is unique and will need a tailored approach to their learning.

Some areas where a tailored approach may be helpful include [attention](#), [learning and memory](#), [processing speed](#) and [planning and organisation](#). More general strategies for supporting a student who has challenges with their thinking are discussed below.



Evidence-based strategies

Consider adjustments to communication style

- **Repeat and simplify instructions.** Use simple words and repeat. Students may need a skill or activity broken down into smaller steps. Some students might need instructions repeated multiple times.
- **Use visual instructions.** Visual instructions about how to do something might be needed. Consider demonstrating the task or asking another student to demonstrate. You can also use a visual schedule, poster or video to outline or model the task.
- **Some students may find it easier if they can use gestures.** Some may need to point to the correct answer instead of talking.

Consider adjustments to activities and rules

- **Aim tasks at current understanding.** Aim tasks at the student's current level of understanding so they can achieve success.
- **Consider what resources are used.** Where you can, use concrete materials, and provide pictures showing how to complete the task.

Provide lots of opportunities to practise

- **Students may need to practise a task or behaviour many times.** Time to practise in different settings and with different materials can help them to learn to use that skill in other situations.
- **Offer fewer tasks with more opportunities to practise.** This is better than offering many tasks with little opportunity to practise.

Make each session as structured as possible

- **Provide a clear schedule and routine.** Visual cues can let students know what is coming up, and how they should move from one activity to another.

Provide feedback

- **Give encouragement and correction.** Support participation with encouragement. Encourage or correct immediately when students are learning a task. You can reduce this gradually as they become more capable.



- **Check understanding.** Check for understanding by asking specific questions or asking them to repeat instructions.

Work collaboratively

- **Provide plenty of opportunities for students to work together.** Other students can help a student with cognitive challenges by restating instructions or showing them how to do a task.
- **Allocate specific tasks within the group.** Consider assigning tasks so that a student can use modified materials or instructions if needed.

Best practice tips

Many students can be taught how to self-monitor their behaviour

- That is, to record whether they have done what they were asked to do. Refer to AllPlay Learn's self-monitoring form under relevant resources below.

Other considerations

Safety drills

- Some students may not know how to tell an adult if there is an emergency, or what to do in an emergency or emergency drill. Consider making time for demonstrating and practising what to do.

Friendships

- A teenager with cognitive challenges may find understanding friendships and feeling different challenging. Access AllPlay Learn's story [What is bullying and what can be done about it](#), under relevant resources below.

Homework

- Some students may find completing homework without help challenging. Work out what a student is able to do without help when assigning homework. Alternatively, consider not giving homework to the class to give the student some time away from books.



Other co-occurring conditions

- Students with cognitive challenges may also experience [anxiety](#), [intellectual disability](#), [autism](#) or [Attention/Deficit-Hyperactivity disorder \(ADHD\)](#).
- Refer to information about these areas to help support the student.

Relevant resources

Visit our [resources page](#) for a range of resources that can help to create inclusive education environments for students with disabilities and developmental challenges. Some particularly relevant resources for supporting students with cognition/thinking issues include:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- Locker checklist
- Problem solving guide
- Character strengths poster (A3)
- Student self-monitoring form
- AllPlay Learn Story - Learn how to be organised
- AllPlay Learn Story - What is bullying and what to do about it