



Specific Learning Disability

About specific learning disability

Children with a specific learning disability find a specific area of learning very challenging, such as reading, spelling, handwriting or mathematics, but do well in other areas of learning. Some may even excel in other areas of learning. Children with specific learning disabilities often have other developmental disorders too, such as ADHD. A child can have more than one specific learning disability. Some common specific learning disabilities include:

Reading disability

Children with a reading disability, which is also known as dyslexia, typically have trouble recognising words. They can find it difficult to 'sound out' and blend the sounds in a word. This can make it difficult for them to understand things that are written or spell words correctly. They may find it hard to connect speech sounds with written letters or words.

Writing disability

A child with a writing disability may write slowly and have trouble drawing letters. They may have challenges with grammar and vocabulary, and they may misspell words. They may find it hard to organise their ideas, or to write a creative or logical piece

Mathematics disability

Mathematics disabilities look different from child to child. Some children find it hard to understand the meaning of numbers, and they may count on their fingers. Other children may find basic addition or subtraction difficult. Some children may find more complex and abstract problems difficult to understand.



Strengths

What might be some strengths?

- Children with specific learning disabilities may do well in, and even excel in, other areas of their learning.
- Children with a reading disability may be good at nonverbal tasks. They may be particularly good with visual-spatial skills (ability to mentally picture and move images).
- Children with a reading disability may have a good understanding of information taught out loud or using images.

Where you might provide support?

- Children with specific learning disabilities may take longer to learn new information in a specific area of learning. They may need extra help in the area of learning they find difficult.
- Children with a reading disability may find other subjects difficult if there is a lot of reading. This is because it can take them much longer to read the information, and they may not understand what they read.
- Many children with a specific learning disability need support with tasks where they need to remember lots of steps.
- Some children with a specific learning disability may find it difficult to find rhythms in music or text.
- Some children may find gross or fine motor tasks difficult.



Evidence-based strategies

Directly tackle underlying skills

- **Target phonological skills.** Consider teaching children phonemes (speech sounds), graphemes (letters that make up a sound such as 'ph'), morphemes (smallest part of a word that means something, such as 'cut' in 'cutting'), and orthography – especially when students are in lower primary. For example, ask children to rearrange syllables to form a word, or write different word endings. The Literacy Teaching Toolkit on the Victorian State Government Education and Training website has more information on developing phonological awareness in children.
- **Target comprehension.** Building student understanding or comprehension of text can support a child with a reading disability - especially when students are in upper primary. For example, ask students to guess what might happen half-way through a story, or imagine a scene from the story.
- **Target working memory.** Students with specific learning disabilities may need extra help to support their working memory (remembering several things at the same time). Consider how to tailor tasks so that there isn't too much to remember at a time. Extra supports such as mnemonics (memory strategies) or handouts/notes on the board can be helpful.

Engage other senses and make learning fun

- **Use visual supports.** Mathematics may be simpler for some students to learn when concrete, visual objects are used in demonstrations. Asking students to create semantic maps or graphic organisers may support students with a writing or reading disability.
- **Use music, rhythm and touch.** Rhythm and music can help a child learn phonemes. Dots on written numbers that a student can touch and count can help a child learn to add and subtract.
- **Make it a game.** When possible mix learning with fun games to increase student enjoyment of learning.

Provide lots of opportunities to practise

- **Students may need to practise a task lots of times.** Consider giving students lots of time to practise. It may be helpful to give them lots of similar mathematics problems or have them read the same short story lots of times. For children with reading disabilities, this is particularly helpful with a book that has lots of words that need decoding (i.e. words where the pronunciations are not easily predicted from the spelling).



- **When a task is new, students will learn best with help.** When possible, offer them help (i.e. prompts, demonstrations, encouragement), and gradually reduce this help as they become more capable. This can be provided by teachers, or if working in pairs or small groups, by other students.
- **Mix mastered tasks with target tasks.** When students are practising, mixing lots of tasks they can already do with a few new tasks can help them feel confident.
- **Choose computer programs or apps with care.** Programs or apps for tablets that target skills such as handwriting, decoding words, spelling, reading rhythm and phonemes may help a child learn these skills. Programs which 'do the work' for the child (e.g. programs which read the story to the child) are helpful for activities where the focus is not on their reading (e.g. Integrated Studies), but may not be a helpful learning-to-read tool. When a child with a reading disability is practising reading, they will get better results trying to read words for themselves.

Consider how you give instructions

- **Provide clear and explicit instructions.** Consider giving clear and specific information to students. Break down target skills and identify the components of a problem.
- **Model tasks and the underlying strategies or thinking.** Students may learn more effectively if shown how to do a task. Consider talking out loud to demonstrate the strategies you use to problem solve when working on the task.
- **Provide concrete examples.** Students may learn new information more easily when there are concrete examples and objects. When students can complete concrete problems they can then start working on abstract problems. This is especially important with students from lower primary.
- **Monitor and check understanding.** Check if students have understood what they are learning. Consider checking their understanding and progress regularly.

Provide students with extra supports and strategies

- **Teach students to self-monitor.** Students can be taught to assess their own work. For example, give students with a writing disability a list of things to include in their work (e.g. five adjectives) and ask them to plan how they will include them. They can then assess whether they have successfully included that list of things in their work. Storyboards (drawings of the storyline) may help students plan.



- **Provide opportunities for peer tutoring.** Consider pairing a student with a learning disability with other students or incorporating group work into learning. Other students can help by demonstrating how to do a task, or by giving prompts and feedback. See [AllPlay Learn's peer mediation and group work](#) for important tips about pairing children.

Best practice tips

Teach a range of strategies.

- It can be helpful to teach upper primary students a range of strategies for solving mathematics problems. For example, with a sum such as $68 - 64 = ?$, a child could count forward from 64, count backwards from 68, or minus 4 from 8, and 60 from 60.

Curriculum considerations

The Arts

- Students with reading disabilities may need support with reading sheet music.
- Larger sheet music with stems that have consistent directions (i.e. all facing up, or all facing down) may be easier for children to read.
- Some children may find rhythm challenging. Providing extra time to practise rhythm-based activities can help a child in both music AND their reading!

English

- Children with a reading or writing disability may need extra support with this subject. A range of very relevant strategies are covered in the above evidence-based strategies.
- Consider whether some tasks can be tailored so there is less written content for some literacy skills. For example, if assessing whether a child understood a book read to the class, a student could draw images to identify key plot twists instead of writing them down.

Health and Physical Education

- Some students with a specific learning disability may find coordination difficult.
- For any tasks involving written work, see the above evidence-based strategies.



The Humanities

- Students with a reading or writing disability may need written tasks to be tailored for their current reading level. Consider tailoring your approach to include teaching methods that don't involve reading.
- Audio textbooks allow students to focus on learning the information they need to know.

Languages

- Students with a specific learning disability in reading or writing may find learning new phonetics challenging. If the new language uses a non-phonetic alphabet (i.e. Chinese characters) they may need extra support.
- Students with a reading or writing disability may need written tasks to be tailored for their current reading level. Consider tailoring your approach to include teaching methods that don't involve reading.
- Audio textbooks allow students to focus on learning the information they need to know.

Mathematics

- Children with a mathematics disability will need support with this subject. A range of very relevant strategies are covered in the above evidence-based strategies.
- Children with a reading disability may need support with mathematics. In particular, they may need support with remembering number facts or 'how many' a particular number is.
- Students with a reading or writing disability may need written tasks to be tailored for their current reading level. Consider tailoring your approach to include teaching methods that don't involve reading.
- Audio textbooks allow students to focus on learning the information they need to know.
- Starting with concrete materials before moving to abstract concepts may be helpful.

Science

- Students with a reading or writing disability may need written tasks to be tailored for their current reading level. Consider tailoring your approach to include teaching methods that don't involve reading.
- Audio textbooks allow students to focus on learning the information they need to know.



Technologies

- Students with a reading or writing disability may benefit from tasks that are aimed at their current reading level. Consider tailoring your approach to include teaching methods that don't involve reading.

Other considerations

Behaviour

- Some students might also show challenging behaviours. It's important to remember children are most likely trying to communicate a need or want that is not being met.
- Refer to the [ABC approach](#) for more information on how to reduce challenging behaviour by supporting the child and promoting more helpful behaviour, and our [emotions page](#) for more information about supporting a child with managing their emotions.

English as an additional language (EAL)

- Students with a specific learning disability in reading or writing who are learning English as an additional language (EAL) may find it challenging to learn to read or write.
- This may be even more difficult for children who have been taught reading or writing in a language that does not use a phonetic alphabet (i.e. Chinese characters).
- These students will require extra support and time.

Transitions

- A child with a specific learning disability may benefit from supports when moving across education settings.
- Making clear links to what will be similar may reduce anxiety. Consider telling students what will be the same so that they know they already have some of the skills they will need.
- It may be helpful to teach and practice organisation and homework skills, and time- and self-management skills.
- For more information about supporting students with disabilities when transitioning to a primary or secondary school setting access AllPlay Learn's [transition page](#).



Other co-occurring conditions

- Some children with a specific learning disability may also experience [attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder](#), difficulties with [hearing](#), [autism](#) or [anxiety](#).
- 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 children with disabilities and developmental challenges. Some particularly relevant resources for children with specific learning disabilities include:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- Student self-monitoring form