Creating an Optimal Learning Environment:

A Guide to Helping Children Reach Their Full Potential

Created by Michael Tschritter
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Creating an Optimal Learning Environment: A Guide to Helping Children Reach Their Full Potential

Purpose of the Guide

All children are unique individuals with their own learning styles, needs, and ideas. With proper support and guidance, each and every student can thrive as a learner. Creating an optimal learning environment is an essential component to helping students achieve the goal of becoming life-long learners because when a child feels a sense of belonging and acceptance they feel truly inspired to reach their full potential. According to Edmunds and Edmunds (2014) “the academic success of students is dependent on their learning environment and the behaviors that are present in these environments” (p. 64). All educators must consider what kind of a learning environment they are creating for their students and what kinds of conditions go into creating a successful, optimal learning environment for all students. As such, I feel compelled as an educator to critically analyze my educational beliefs and ask myself ‘what kind of conditions can I enact within my classroom that will help to create an optimal learning environment in which all students can reach their full potential?’

As an educator, I will aim to provide my students with an environment that is optimal for open and engaging learning, which also promotes the development of belonging, community, positive relationships, and respect. I want to work collaboratively with my students, both within the classroom and the wider school community. My role will be to facilitate discovery within my students and help to inspire them to continue their life-long learning journeys. I will guide my students in their learning, helping them to become active and responsible participants in their own learning. In conclusion, the purpose of this guide is to provide a collection of my own ideas about how educators can create an optimal learning environment for their students. In the guide,
you will find a great deal of information about several topics including the key components to creating an optimal learning environment, attention grabbing techniques to use with students, transitioning strategies, social participation techniques, and specific strategies that can be used to help children with special needs excel.

**Creating an Optimal Learning Environment**

As discussed by George Couros at great length in his book, *The Innovator’s Mindset*, there are eight critical components to creating an optimal learning environment. The components are as follows:

1. **Students need to feel safe:** This is the most important factor for students to not only succeed, but to also excel. Safety includes students feeling that they are emotionally, physically, and psychologically secure, as well as the core belief that their ideas will be valued. The learning environment is safe to make mistakes, share thoughts, and know that their ideas will not be attacked or ridiculed. Mutual respect, trust, and the acceptance of diversity must be apparent for students to succeed.

2. **Students are cared for as people first:** A child will not succeed in the classroom if there are external factors affecting their daily being. As teachers, we must make every effort to take care of our students and show them that we care about their personal well being. Developing rapport and positive relationships with each and every one of our students is key if we want our children to succeed and reach their full potential. Some suggestions to care for our students as people first including asking them about their day, talking to them about their interests, and finding out what is important to them. We always need to teach our students first. If we always remember this…. our abilities to thread the curriculum across the learning continuum grows exponentially.
3. **Opportunities for fun:** This is a no-brainer. If you enjoy what you do, have a sense of humour, and can laugh in your environment, you will do excel while enjoying what you do. This has been proven over and over again, and it is essential that we can learn to laugh at ourselves, and with our students. If teachers act as facilitators of engaging learning opportunities that have real world connections, our students will see the many connections that the curriculum has to their own lives. Suggestions for fun in the classroom include brain breaks to help students transition between activities, the use of concrete manipulatives to help with abstract tasks, and the use of technology as a concentration aid (e.g. listening to music during independent work periods). Creating a learning community that students want to be a part of is just one way we can create a better environment for students to learn.

4. **All ideas and opinions are valued:** All students have unique and potentially wonderful ideas. As educators, we need to seek first to understand our students by listening to them and then talking to them about their thoughts. As teachers, it is our responsibility to enable the next generation of critical and creative thinkers to flourish. Furthermore, we need to model of our students the mindset that ‘if at first you do not succeed … reflect … and try again.’ If we keep a growth mindset and view our mistakes as an opportunity to grow then we will truly thrive as learners.

5. **Individualized and differentiated learning:** Students need to have the opportunity to show their understanding in a way that is meaningful and relevant to them. Having one way to get to the same destination is not fair and is not differentiating learning for each child. The right to choice within learning helps students to see that they are valued as learners and that their teacher wants them to reach their full potential.
6. **Instilling the mindset of being life-long learners:** What do students know about what they are learning? Do they understand the connections between their learning and real life? What is the knowledge base that they need to build to move forward? Feedback for growth and providing strategies to improve learning become foundational pillars in the learning process and help our students to grow as life-long learners.

7. **Students as leaders in the classroom:** To be a leader does not mean that a student the most popular. It simply can mean that our students have the opportunity to show leadership in areas they excel and are passionate in. We have to help students find out where they are leaders and give them opportunities to exhibit this. As educators, we need to appreciate learning at all times, even if it is from a child. Not only will students appreciate that they have taught their teacher something, they will go out of their way to further their own learning to ensure that it happens again. Do your best to find opportunities for ALL students to exhibit leadership in different areas of the classroom.

8. **Opportunities for all to reflect:** Time has to be given to students where they can self-assess their learning and put their ideas together. This could easily be done in a journal, blog, through music or art, or through just having conversations with others. It is not the avenue that is important, but the opportunity. Find time in the busy school day to let students reflect on what they are learning. The time spent now will be well worth the dividends in the future.
Attention Grabbing Techniques

Bubbles and Bear Hugs (Works Especially Well for Younger Children):

Explain to the children that you want them to show you their best bubbles and bear hugs. Demonstrate making bubbles by puffing out your cheeks. Tell the children the bubbles will help them to be silent. Then demonstrate giving yourself a big bear hug. Tell the children that the bear hug will help them to keep their hands to themselves. Then tell the children you want them to show you their best bubbles and bear hugs.

Give Me Five:

The children put their hands in the air. The group should get progressively quieter. If you find that your group is still talking while they have their hands in the air, remind the children that give me five means the following five body parts should be paying attention and/or not moving: Mouth, eyes, ears, arms, and legs.

Class, Class, Yes, Yes:

When the teacher says “Class, Class,” the students respond saying “Yes, Yes,” mimicking the tone of voice and the length of the words spoken by the teacher. What this does, is activate the prefrontal cortex, the brain's main control for decision making, planning, and the focusing of attention. In four words, this dialogue, performed correctly, grabs the students' attention at any moment in time during the class. Students of every age quickly learn, and happily respond to, this call-out and its variations.

Use a Clapping Pattern:

Clap or tap in a pattern, for example, clap slowly twice and then clap fast three times. The children are to stop what they are doing and repeat the pattern. If necessary, do it again until all children have responded and are quiet. If your group uses this method, there are many ideas that can be combined with this).
If You Can Hear Me:

Say, in a normal tone of voice, "Touch your head if you can hear me." Those listening will quiet down and touch their head. Then say, "Touch your ears if you can hear me." More children respond with touching their ears. Finally say, "Touch your shoulders if you can hear me." By the third action/body part you should have the attention of your group.

Ready to Rock:

The leader asks “Ready to rock?”… and the kids reply “Ready to roll”. If you find that you did not grab all of the kids attention the first time repeat it again but slightly louder by saying “I said are you all ready to rock?”… This should help to get all of the kids’ attention. The most important aspect of this technique is maintaining the expectation that the kids listen to your directions/instructions when they hear the phrase.

Let Me Hear You Say Alright Ok:

This technique involves the leader saying the 1st and 3rd lines and the kids responding with the 2nd and 4th lines. The leader starts by saying “Let me hear you say alright ok”. The kids respond by saying “We’re alright ok”. The leader then says “Since you’re cool let me know it”. The kids say “We’re so cool”… and then each child strikes a cool pose and freezes until given further instructions by the leader.

Lights On/Lights Off:

Children look at the leaders and listen when the lights are flicked off and on.

Voices:

When you say, "Voices," teach the children to respond with a quiet, "Shhh..." Use this if the children are too loud. If you want their attention, say, "Voices" again and
they respond with a quieter, "Shhh..." Say it a third time very quietly, "Voices." All children should be quiet and ready to listen.

**Still Waters:**

Tell your group that they will often be playing, "The Still Waters Game"; they will know the game has begun when you say, "1, 2, 3, --- 3, 2, 1… still waters has begun." Ask them to freeze like an ice cube and remain silent when they hear that sentence. Time the children to see how long they can remain still. The goal is to beat their best time. Hold your fist in the air and each time you see someone move or talk, put a finger up. Once you have all five fingers up, check your watch and tell the group how long they were able to remain still.

**Bump-da-da-Bump-Bump:**

One favorite attention getter is a leader saying, “Bump-da-da-Bump Bump” and the children reply in unison, “Bump-Bump!”

**Laughing Cloth/Handkerchief:**

When the group sees a cloth/handkerchief thrown into the air, they laugh as loud as possible. When the cloth/handkerchief hits the ground, they go silent.

**Do a countdown:**

Do a countdown. For example, you could say, “When I get to zero, I need you the room to be completely quiet. 10, 9, 8…” When time is up, move on to the next activity just like you said you’d do, and let stragglers catch up without acknowledging them except to help as needed. If you’re consistent with this, students will learn you mean what you say and they have to keep pace!

**Ollie Ollie Oy Oy:**

Begin by telling the campers that when you say “Ollie, Ollie”… they are to respond by saying “Oy, Oy”. This technique is quick and simple and efficiently
gets children to settle themselves. Use it when you need to get your group to listen to directions and/or instructions.

**Boom Chicka Boom:**

This chant can be used to facilitate group transitions. If your group is noisy, start chanting loudly, then lower your volume with each successive repetition. For the next-to-last time it is said, whisper the words. For the last repetition, only lip-sync or mouth the words.

**BOOM CHICK BOOM!**

* I said a boom chicka boom
  'Students repeat'
* I said a boom chicka boom.
  'Students repeat'
* I said a boom chicka rocka
  Chicka rocka, chicka boom
  'Students repeat'

* I said a boom chicka boom.
  'Students repeat'

Oh yeah (echo), uh huh (echo), next time (echo)
A little softer (echo).
A little louder...
A little slower...
A little faster... The end!!!
All Set?:

Simply say to the students in a loud voice “All set?” They answer, “You bet.”

Alligator, Alligator:

To get students’ attention loudly say “alligator, alligator” the kids reply “CHOMP” as they slap their hands like an alligator mouth.

1, 2, 3… Eyes on Me:

Another one I’ve seen is simply saying “1-2-3 Eyes on me.” You have to be a little louder, but it usually works… or simply counting “1, 2, 3, etc.” really slowly, but loud enough that they can hear you.

Strike a Pose:

This technique works great for getting a large group of children to stop moving around a room quickly. The way it works is one leader calls out “Strike a pose”… and every child must immediately freeze and demonstrate their best silent pose. In fact, this technique can even be used to motivate children by telling the group that you will be congratulating/giving praise to the child who strikes the best quiet pose.
Transitioning Strategies

What Makes You Happy?:

When you have some down time-waiting or standing in line… Start off with what makes you happy ---and then take turns calling out things such as: Sunny days make me happy; Sunshine makes me happy; Warm cookies make me happy; Saturday mornings make me happy; Friday nights makes me happy….. Going to the movies makes me happy…..Pizza…..Going on vacation…..Blue skies…..Summer time, etc. When done in a light-hearted manner, the children will join in and share! You’ll be amazed how the atmosphere can change—as well as realizing it doesn’t have to be a trip to Disney World to do it!

Transition Fun: Who Can…?:

See how many in the group can…

- Roll their tongue (85% of people can).
- Wiggle their ears; wiggle their nose.
- Show they are double jointed.
- Touch their ear with their elbow (I don’t think anyone can!).
- Whistle (can they whistle by blowing both in and out?).
- Twiddle thumbs (try to do it in both directions at same time!).
- Rub their stomach and pat head at same time.
- Make owl hoots with clasped hands.
- Make a “popping sound with hand tapping their puckered large “O” shaped mouth.
- Invite children to create their own versions of the transition activities!
Do a countdown:

Do a countdown. For example, you could say, “When I get to zero, I need you the room to be completely quiet. 10, 9, 8…” When time is up, move on to the next activity just like you said you’d do, and let stragglers catch up without acknowledging them except to help as needed. If you’re consistent with this, students will learn you mean what you say and they have to keep pace!

I Spy Line-Up:

Explain that when you say, “I spy,” every child needs to stop what he/she is doing, listen, and respond with, “What do you spy?” Say something like, "I spy children dancing in one place," or “I spy a rock star silently playing a guitar.” The students act out that idea until you again say, "I spy." Then all the students stop what they are doing and respond with, "What do you spy?" The game continues with you suggesting other ideas such as, “I spy children waving their arms.” After playing awhile, say “I spy students lining-up quietly.” Children may be chosen to lead the activity.

OH-AH:

Start with everyone in a circle holding hands. One person gives a quick squeeze to the hand of the person on the RIGHT. The squeeze is passed from person to person around the circle until it is moving smoothly. Now add sound. Squeeze and say "ooh"… and watch it go around. Next add "ah", but with a LEFT exchange…some fun as the sounds pass over each other at the same time! Once the final squeeze of the last child’s hand has happened every child should be quiet enough to line-up.
Cooperative Stand-Up:

Have your group get into pairs. The pairs will sit on the floor, back pressed to back—and arms interlocked. They must stand up without using their hands. It can end here...OR... After a pair stands up, have them find another pair and all 4 must sit down and stand up. Go on as such until the entire group is together and have everyone try to stand up. This is a good game to promote friendliness and is fun when you have an exceptionally large group.

Zoom:

Standing in a circle, children orally pass the word "zoom" around from one person to another. The activity moves rapidly to build and sustain community involvement. .....Variations can include switching directions, multiple zooms at one time, children leading zoom, and USING OTHER WORDS to build vocabulary. .....The first time, have youth sit in a circle with their legs crossed, sitting up straight with their hands in their laps. Model this posture, and ask the children to have their knees touch their neighbors' knees to form a tight circle.

Backwards ABC’s:

LEARN TO SING THE ABC'S BACKWARDS! Why? Just for the fun of it!
Start with "Z" and go from there...
Z Y X W V U T S R Q P O N M L K J I H G F E D C B A
This is a great activity for helping children to not be excessively loud during transitions between activities and rooms. Also, saying the alphabet backwards takes longer than you think.

**Guess My Rule:**

Use this deductive reasoning game when kids are waiting. The object is for students to figure out the rule you are using to sort them into groups. Example: Call out a number of kids all wearing “blue”. When the youth guess they are all wearing blue---call out another similarity—such as all in 5th grade or all having brown hair, etc.

**Line-Up If You Are:**

- Wearing the Color: Line up if you’re wearing the color red; line up if you’re wearing blue, etc.
- Pick Some Random Idea: Line up if you have a tooth missing; line up if you have brown hair, etc.
- Born in this birthday month: Line up if you were born in August; line up if you were born in September, etc.

**Staring Contest:**

No laughing, no poking, no nodding, no blinking--just staring into the eyes of your opponent to see who flinches first. Once every pair of students has a winner, transition to the next activity.
Five Minute Warnings:

Many children are often unaware of time, such as how long they have been playing. Giving children a countdown is a helpful strategy to ease an upcoming transition. Start as simply as possible with a five minute warning and alert your group again when there is one minute remaining. Visual timers can also help to increase awareness of time. This allows the child to gauge in their own head how long they have to finish a particular activity. If you’re aware of specific situations that trigger difficult transitions, allow plenty of extra time. In any given situation, you may have to repeat the transitioning process several times before the child becomes comfortable.

Other Suggestions for Getting Children to Transition:

Ask children to come to circle as if they were moving through peanut butter, wiggling through Jell-O, in a marching band, a plane flying to the airport, a car driving on a road, a bird flying to its nest, and so on.
Transition Poems:

*Below and on the next page, you will find a collection of various transition poems that can be used to get a large group’s attention. While many of these transition poems are geared towards younger children, each poem has its own merits. Pick whichever ones work best for you and your group.

What’s That Wiggle?:

I'll wiggle my fingers and wiggle my toes,

I'll wiggle my arms and wiggle my nose.

And now that all the wiggles are out,

We'll listen to what circles about.

The Big Stretch:

I stretch my fingers away up high

Until they almost reach the sky

I lay them in my lap and you see

Where they're as quiet as they can be.
Twinkle, Twinkle, Clean Up Where You Are:

Twinkle Twinkle little star
Time to clean up where you are
Put each thing back in its place
Keep a smile upon your face
Twinkle, twinkle little star
Time to clean up where you are.

The Walking Quiet:

Sung to: If you’re Happy and You Know It!

When we're walking in the hall, we're very quiet
When we're walking in the hall, we're very quiet
When we're walking in the hall, we're very quiet
And we never, never, ever push our neighbors!

Children of the Circle:

One little, two little, three little children
Four little, five little, six little children,
Seven little, eight little, nine little children,
All in the circle!
Transition Songs:

*In a similar fashion to the transition poems, many of these transition songs will work well for younger children. Pick whichever ones work best for you and seem to capture the attention of your group.

THE ANTS ARE MARCHING;

The ants are marching to the hive, hooray! Hooray!
The ants are oh so quiet as they come my way.
Some come fast, some come slow.
All are marching as they go.
Oh, I’m oh so glad, the ants could come today!

IF YOU’RE WEARING RED TODAY:

If you’re wearing red today – follow me.
If you’re wearing yellow today – follow me.
If you’re wearing blue today – then come along this way.
If you’re wearing green today – follow me.

(Start singing, have children line up behind you as you call out their color.
Continue the song with different colors until everyone is walking behind you.)
I WIGGLE MY FINGERS:

(A Movement Rhyme)

I wiggle my fingers,
I wiggle my toes,
I wiggle my shoulders,
I wiggle my nose.
Now no more wiggles
Are left in me,
So I can sit as still as can be.

TWO LITTLE FEET:

(A Movement Rhyme)

Two little feet go tap, tap, tap.
Two little hands go clap, clap, clap.
One little body, twirls around.
One quiet body sits back down.

OPEN YOUR HANDS:

(A Movement Rhyme)

Open your hand,
Then clap, clap, clap
Now, you lay them in your lap.
Two little eyes looking straight ahead.
Two little ears, hearing what is said.
It’s time to clean up now.
It’s time to clean up now.
Heigh-ho, just watch us go.
It’s time to clean up now.
We’ll put our things away.
Ready for another day.
Heigh-ho, just watch us go.
We’ll put our things away.

WIGGLE WORMS:

(A Movement Rhyme)

Once there were some little worms.
And all they did, was squirm and squirm.
They wiggled and wiggled up and down.
They wiggled and wiggled all around. (Let your children around for a while)
They wiggled and wiggled and wiggled until,
They were tired and could sit very still. (Have children sit down)
Now they could listen,
Now they could see
All of the things
I have here with me.
Social Participation Techniques

Beginning of the Day:

- Communicate clear expectations about rules and briefly discuss the schedule for the day with all children in your class.
- Provide motivating activities at the opening of the day or class, such as physical activity, brain teasers, joke of the day, or interesting historical or science facts.
- Especially try using a question of the day in order to allow the children in your class to get to know each other. One suggestion is to use the question of the day as an attendance or community circle technique. Examples of such questions include:
  - If you could be any animal which one would you choose?
  - What is your favorite food?
  - What is your favorite color?
  - What is your favorite summer activity?
Making Friends:

- Use the language of friendship and community throughout the school day to encourage children to consider other campers as friends and to treat one another with kindness and respect.
- Play icebreaker games that promote and facilitate friendships by providing multiple opportunities for children to interact and work with one another.
- Use descriptive feedback to reinforce individual children, groups of children and/or the whole group when they demonstrate friendly behaviours.
- Work with individual children to develop low-key cues and prompts (such as thumbs that you can use to remind them to use their friendship skills.)
Asking for Help:

- Talk with the children about the importance of asking questions and asking for help. Discuss how all questions are good questions and explain how asking a question may help other children who might have the same question.
- Use descriptive feedback to reinforce individual children when they demonstrate effective strategies for asking for help.
- Pair individual children with positive peers who can serve as role models in asking for help and can also provide support by responding to children’s basic questions (e.g., “What do we do next? What pieces of equipment do I need? Where are they?”).
- Provide proximity by positioning yourself nearby individual students who may require assistance for certain tasks. This will make it easier for the student to ask for help.
Disagreeing in an Agreeable Way:

- Use discussion, modelling and role-play to teach children the importance of using polite language and pleasant tone of voice when it is necessary to disagree with others.
- Work with children to collaboratively develop step-by-step strategies for disagreeing in an agreeable way, such as the following.
  - Acknowledge the other person’s point-of-view or request (e.g., “I understand you want to ….”).
  - State your position (e.g., “I’d like to ….”).
  - Offer a rationale (e.g., “I think this is a good idea because….”).
  - Ask the other person to consider your position (e.g., “Would you consider …?”).
  - If necessary, offer a compromise.
  - If you cannot reach an agreement, consider if you need to:
    - Comply to the request with no further comments (e.g., in response to an adult’s request).
    - Agree to disagree and walk away.
- Use descriptive feedback to acknowledge individual students who use positive strategies to voice their disagreement and resolve differences with others.
- Develop self-monitoring strategies with individual students to reflect on and keep track of how they express disagreement and resolve differences. For some students, it may be necessary to include a systematic approach to reinforcement as part of the self-monitoring process. Examples of self-monitoring strategies include:
  - Think about how I feel about the situation.
  - Think about what the other person may think.
Encouraging Independence:

- Develop group routines that promote and facilitate independence by providing activities that allow children to explore and exert their independence while still knowing there is a structured environment in place. Examples of these activities include:
  - Having different leaders run both a circle game and a tag game simultaneously.
  - Providing choices of different activities through group votes.
- Develop self-monitoring strategies children can use to reflect on and keep track of routines and tasks they complete on their own.
- Set up a systematic approach to reinforcement for students who are working on improving their independent work habits. Reinforcement should encourage moving toward intrinsic motivation (e.g., “How does it feel when you are able to complete that by yourself?”). Provide cues and prompts such as “thumbs up” to encourage students to continue persevering with a task.)
ADHD Learning Strategies

What is it?

Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) is a neurobiological condition that can cause inattention, hyperactivity and/or impulsivity, and other learning difficulties. The brain can become inefficient or sluggish in the areas that control impulses, screen sensory input and focus attention.

What Strategies Can I Use to Help Students in My Class Thrive?

- Give clear, brief directions and provide extra time for tasks.
- Teach active listening strategies. Encourage kids to delay their responses, since this is frequently an effective way to help them process more deeply what has been said.
- Remind kids to “stop, think and listen” before responding, acting or making a choice.
- Break tasks into short, easy-to-manage steps. Provide each step separately and give feedback along the way.
- Help the kids make a plan for a task by identifying the goal, breaking the task into steps, and identifying where to start and end. Encourage the kid to use self-talk to work through more challenging tasks (e.g., “First I have to ____, and then I have to ____.”).
- Provide opportunities for repetition and actively engage kids in using memory cues to remember basic information.
- Explicitly model social skills, such as how to read body language and expressions.
- Provide supports and set up the environment for success in social situations, such as:
  - Using a buddy system for recess, lunch and other unstructured social times.
- Provide support in transitioning from one activity or place to another. Cues, routines and purposeful activity during transitions may be helpful.
Anxiety Disorders Learning Strategies

What is it?

Anxiety disorders are characterized by an excessive and persistent sense of apprehension along with physical symptoms, such as sweating, palpitations, stomach aches and feelings of stress.

What Strategies Can I Use to Help Students in My Class Thrive?

- Conduct reality checks with students to avoid unrealistic expectations for themselves (E.g. Having many friends is great but it is unrealistic to be friends with absolutely everybody).
- Use positive self-talk. Work with the kids to choose positive words and phrases he or she can use in a variety of situations (E.g. I am awesome no matter what).
- Explore the use of distractions to refocus a kid’s anxiety. For example, if a kid is worried about an event that will happen later in the day, provide engaging activities in the earlier part of the day that will keep him or her busy.
- Take the time to develop trust with the kid and provide opportunities to discuss anxieties. Allow the kid to come to you or signal when he or she is worried or becoming distressed.
- Provide a routine, predictable camp environment. Give the kid advanced notice when there will be a change in the schedule or routine.
- Watch for behavioural cues that indicate the student may be getting anxious, such as refusing tasks, frequent trips to the washroom or attendance problems.
- Work with the student to choose strategies for reducing anxiety. Strategies may include such things as:
  - Moving to a quiet place.
  - Doing relaxation exercises.
- Doing visualization exercises (e.g., imagining both the anxiety-producing situation and a solution).
- Focusing on a sensory input like a squeeze ball
- Using visual reminders, cues and/or prompts
- Debriefing with a teacher or other person the student trusts
- Using humour or other distractions.
- Allow the student to get up and move around to reduce feelings of confinement.
Autism Spectrum Disorders Learning Strategies

What is it?

Autism or autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are complex, lifelong neurological disorders that affect the functioning of the brain. Individuals with ASD have developmental disabilities that can impact how they understand what they see, hear and otherwise sense, which in turn can result in difficulties with communication, behaviour and relationships with other people. ASD can range from mild to severe and may be accompanied by other disorders, such as learning disabilities, anxiety, attention difficulties or unusual responses to sensory stimuli.

What Strategies Can I Use to Help Students in My Class Thrive?

- Ensure the kid has some way of telling you what he or she wants or needs.
- Provide information in visual forms, including hand signals, written words, pictures, or symbols.
- If the student experiences echolalia (repetition of the speech of others), provide appropriate words that can be used instead.
- Ensure that each task you give the kid has a clear beginning and end, clear instructions, ample time for completion and a model or illustration to follow.
- Break large tasks into small, discrete steps and teach and reinforce each step.
- Help the student become more independent by:
  - Giving choices, as much as possible.
  - Teaching skills in different settings to ensure understanding and generalization across environments.
- Warn the student about changes (e.g., to the daily schedule, transitions from one activity or room to another) before they occur as changes often can upset the student with ASD.
- Be aware of child–peer relationships and provide support and guidance, when necessary. Some students may be unaware or misunderstand incidental information and social nuances.
Identify ways to increase positive behaviours (using material reinforcement if necessary, for example, the child might have a special ball they squeeze that helps calm them).
Conduct Disorder Learning Strategies

What is it?

Conduct disorder is a condition characterized by a persistent pattern of behaviour in which the basic rights of others are ignored. Children with conduct disorder have four main types of chronic and persistent behaviour: aggressive conduct; property damage or theft; lying; and serious violations of rules. Mild forms of conduct disorder tend to improve as the child grows older.

What Strategies Can I Use to Help Students in My Class Thrive?

- Use “start” requests rather than “stop” requests. “Do” requests are more desirable than “don’t” requests.
- Make one request at a time, using a quiet voice and, when in close proximity, using eye contact.
- When appropriate, offer a choice (e.g., “Do you want to read or color?”).
- Describe the desired behaviour in clear and specific terms to reduce misunderstanding. Avoid entering into a discussion or argument about the behaviour.
- Recognize that most behaviour has a function. Use observation to determine the function of the behaviour as this will help in determining appropriate strategies to implement.
- Maintain predictable camp routines and rules for all children.
- Provide encouragement and praise.
- Speak to the kid privately about his or her behaviour instead of in front of others, to prevent loss of face and avoid escalation.
- Explicitly teach, reinforce and provide opportunities to practise social and life skills, including how to:
  - Understand one’s own feelings.
  - Be friendly.
  - Read social cues.
  - Talk to peers.
  - Manage anger.
– Make good decisions.
– Solve problems.
Developmental Coordination Disorder Learning Strategies

What is it?

Developmental coordination disorder (DCD) is a motor skills disorder that is fairly prevalent, but can frequently go unrecognized. This disorder interferes with a child being able to perform common, everyday tasks. Frequently described as “clumsy” or “awkward” by their parents and teachers, children with this disorder often have difficulty mastering simple motor activities, such as tying shoes or going down stairs, and are unable to perform age-appropriate academic and self-care tasks. Children with DCD may avoid tasks that require fine and/or gross motor coordination and this can lead to frustration and/or under achievement.

What Strategies Can I Use to Help Student in My Class Thrive?

- When teaching a new motor skill, break it down into components. Each component is practised several times until it becomes more automatic and fluid before adding a new component.
- Make activities in camp as successful and enjoyable as possible. Focus on being active and having fun.
- Have quick ways for children to find partners and form teams that ensure everyone is included and no one child feels like the “last one picked.”
- Use consistent verbal descriptions and visual demonstrations of the movement patterns as you “talk” the child through new patterns (e.g., “up, down, around”). Perform them slowly and exaggerated so the student can adjust and follow.
- Besides breaking the new motor skill down into components, also break it down according to body parts. Have the child focus on learning movement in only one body part at a time (e.g., this is what you do with your arm to dribble the ball).
- Since activities requiring gross motor and fine motor coordination are more difficult for the child, teach the child how to use positive self-talk to reduce
frustration and/or to increase motivation to try physical activities he or she finds challenging.
Expressive Language Disorder Learning Strategies

What is it?

Expressive language refers to the use of spoken language. A child with an expressive language disorder is unable to communicate thoughts, needs or wants at the same level or with the same complexity as his or her same-aged peers. Children with an expressive language disorder may understand most language but are unable to use this language in sentences. Characteristics of an expressive language disorder may include word-finding difficulties, limited vocabulary, overuse of non-specific words like “thing” or “stuff,” over reliance on stock phrases, and difficulty “coming to the point” of what they are trying to say.

What Strategies Can I Use to Help Students in My Class Thrive?

- Repeat back what the child has said, modelling the correct pronunciation, word form or sentence structure. It is unnecessary to ask the child to repeat the correct form after you; what is important is that the child hears the correct form.
- Be patient when the child is speaking; not rushing a child who has expressive language difficulties will reduce frustration levels.
- Help children connect new words and information to pre-existing knowledge.
- To facilitate children’s speech intelligibility and expressive language skills, encourage them to slow down while speaking and face their communication partner.
- Provide descriptive feedback for children when the message is not understood. For example: “You were talking too fast, I didn’t understand where you said you were going after camp today.” This will also improve the students self-monitoring skills.
- The child may have difficulty with social and conversational skills. Teach the language to use in specific social communication situations, such as:
– Greeting people and starting a conversation
– Asking and answering questions
– Asking for help or clarification.

• Provide support in transitioning from one activity or place to another. Cues, routines and purposeful activity during transitions may be helpful so that the child clearly understands what to do.
Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Strategies

What is it?

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) is a pattern of birth defects, learning and behavioural problems affecting individuals whose mothers consumed alcohol during pregnancy. FASD causes a variety of symptoms, including extreme impulsivity, poor judgement, poor memory, difficulty learning basic skills, organizational difficulties, language and speech delays, and gross and fine motor delays.

What Strategies Can I Use to Help Students in My Class Thrive?

- Determine the child’s particular learning style, strengths and needs. Students with FASD typically:
  - Struggle to learn basic information.
  - Have difficulties with memory and organizational skills.
  - Have strengths in visual arts and music.
  - Enjoy repetitive work and succeed in structured situations.
  - Enjoy physical activities.
  - Respond to smaller teaching groups.
- Provide concrete, hands-on activities.
- Keep the child on-task by creating structure, repeating instructions and providing supervision.
- Keep language and directions simple and specific. Check the child’s comprehension of problem solving and abstract concepts before proceeding.
- Create consistency and routine in the group.
- Be aware of the child’s level of responsiveness to sensory stimuli (e.g., lights, noise, touch) and adjust activities and activity spaces accordingly.
- Clearly identify the change from one activity or room to another (e.g., “Five more minutes to finish your picture before we go to the gym.”).
- Model activities and expected responses.
- Break down tasks into smaller, manageable steps.
- Be aware that students with FASD often have better expressive language skills (i.e. explaining a situation) rather than receptive language skills (i.e. hearing/listening to someone talk about a situation). This can be misleading and may lead to social difficulties.
- Work with the child to develop social skills, anger management and impulse control. Consider strategies, such as social stories, role-play and social cueing.
- Be aware of child–peer relationships and provide support and guidance, when necessary. Some students may be unaware or misunderstand incidental information and social nuances.
- Although children with FASD often have difficulty making and keeping relationships with peers and adults, they also can be affectionate, trusting and loyal once relationships are established.
- Be aware that some children may have difficulty telling the truth because of impulsivity, memory difficulties, misinterpreting questions or the desire to please. Directly teach the concept of true and false, real and imaginary, and be aware of this tendency.
- Some children experience difficulties with taking items belonging to others because they don’t understand the concept of ownership, and/or don’t understand the consequences of their actions.
- Be aware that children with FASD may have very poor judgement and may be easily led by peers. Provide supervision and support to keep the child safe.
- Consider a buddy system with strong positive role models.
Mild/Moderate Cognitive Disabilities Strategies

What is it?

The term cognitive disability often is used interchangeably with intellectual or developmental disability. A cognitive disability may be deemed to be mild, moderate or severe depending on the child’s level of intellectual functioning. A mild cognitive disability is intellectual functioning that is significantly below average and that exists concurrently with deficits in adaptive behaviour (how individuals adapt to environmental demands compared to others of the same age). Children with a mild cognitive disability also may exhibit increased frustration or anxiety due to a lack of understanding, particularly during transitions and changes in routines. Explicitly teach social skills, such as how to read body language and expressions. Use modelling, storytelling and role-plays, along with direct instruction. Provide support in transitioning from one activity or place to another. Cues, routines and purposeful activity during transitions may be helpful.

What Strategies Can I Use to Help Students in My Class Thrive?

- Understand that skills may develop at a slower rate, so the gap between the child and peers may widen with age.
- Maintain the child’s attention and focus with short, clear instructions and reminders.
- Provide as structured and predictable as possible an environment to reduce the child’s anxiety during transitions. Be sure to prepare the child for changes in the schedule.
- Reduce distractions.
- Help the child to organize belongings.
- Provide extra time for tasks and, when necessary, adapt the level of difficulty.
- Support the development of self-advocacy skills by involving children in selecting and monitoring supports and strategies that will work best for them.
• Provide clear expectations, consistency, structure and routine that allow the child to participate fully.

• Teach the student appropriate conversational skills and social skills, such as:
  – Greeting people (e.g., saying hello, no hugging)
  – Turn-taking during conversations
  – Asking and answering questions.

• Explicitly teach social skills, such as how to read body language and expressions. Use modelling, storytelling and role-plays, along with direct instruction.

• Provide support in transitioning from one activity or place to another. Cues, routines and purposeful activity during transitions may be helpful.

• Provide opportunities for movement (e.g., allow children to move or stand up; provide the child with a fidget tool such as a squeeze ball to use quietly, as needed; provide stretch or movement breaks as part of the camp routine.

• Provide all children with opportunities for making choices throughout the day.
Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) Learning Strategies

What is it?

Obsessions are persistent thoughts, impulses or images that cause significant distress. Compulsions are repetitive behaviours (e.g., hand washing, ordering, checking) or mental acts (e.g., praying, counting, repeating words silently) that a person feels compelled to do to prevent or reduce distress. Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is a psychiatric condition in which obsessions or compulsions are severe enough to be time consuming, cause marked distress or interfere with everyday functioning. However, be careful other disorders such as ADHD can also look like obsessive compulsive disorder.

What Strategies Can I Use to Help Students in My Class Thrive?

- Keep in mind that persistent, repetitive thoughts may interfere with the child’s ability to concentrate, which may affect many activities, from following directions to paying attention.
- Provide extra time for transitions.
- Do not assume a child’s difficulties or frustrations are due entirely to OCD.
- Provide a flexible and supportive camp environment.
- Watch for signs of social isolation or withdrawal.
- Monitor the child’s interactions with peers. Be aware that the child’s unusual behaviours may be distressing to peers. Misunderstandings may lead to arguments and clashes between peers.
- If the child insists on certain OCD rituals at camp, work with him or her to identify less intrusive rituals (e.g. Tapping one wall rather than having to tap all of the walls in an area).
Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) Strategies

What is it?

Oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) is a condition characterized by a persistent pattern of aggressive and defiant behaviour and a need to annoy or irritate others. Common behaviours include frequent temper tantrums, frequent arguing with both peers and adults, intentionally annoying others, blaming others for own mistakes, and appearing angry and vindictive. Oppositional defiant disorder may develop as a way of dealing with depression, inconsistent rules or standards, or a traumatic event or situation, such as divorce, trauma or conflict.

What Strategies Can I Use to Help Students in My Class Thrive?

- Anticipate difficulty with anger control. Be proactive in recognizing triggers and plan accordingly.
- Be aware that students with ODD tend to create power struggles. Avoid these verbal exchanges. Avoid making comments or talking about situations that may be a source of argument.
- Provide clear, specific expectations for behaviour that the student can follow. For example, “I will follow directions.”
- Be clear on what behaviours are not negotiable and what consequences will follow.
- Use “start” requests rather than “stop” requests. “Do” requests are more desirable than “don’t” requests.
- Make one request at a time, using a quiet voice and, when in close proximity, using eye contact.
- When appropriate, offer a choice (e.g., “Do you want to read or color?”).
- Describe the desired behaviour in clear and specific terms to reduce misunderstanding. Avoid entering into a discussion or argument about the behaviour.
- Keep the transition time to a minimum. Minimize “down time” and plan transitions carefully.
- Maintain predictable routines and expectations.
• Support the development of self-advocacy skills by providing explicit feedback and encouraging goal setting.
• Structure activities to build positive peer relationships. Provide cooperative learning opportunities. Ensure that the student with ODD is not always left out or the last one picked by peers.
• Systematically teach social skills and strategies that the student can use to cope with frustration and to calm down when angry.
• Speak to the child privately about his or her behaviour instead of in front of others, to prevent loss of face and avoid escalation.
• Teach and encourage the student to remove himself or herself from stressful events and situations by walking away or going to a quiet space away from others.
• Encourage students to get help as soon as they feel the situation is getting out-of-hand.
• Use praise, when appropriate, to reward good behaviour and build self-esteem. Be aware that students with ODD may have an unusual response to positive reinforcement.
• Give the child advance notice when there will be a change in the schedule or routine.
Receptive Language Disorder Strategies

What is it?

Receptive language is the comprehension of spoken language. Students with a receptive language disorder have difficulty understanding and processing what is said to them. Receptive language includes understanding figurative language, as well as literal language. Characteristics of a receptive language disorder may include not appearing to listen, difficulty following verbal directions, limited vocabulary, difficulty understanding complex sentences or responding appropriately to questions, parroting words or phrases, and demonstrating lack of interest when storybooks are read to them. Receptive language disorders are a broad category that can range from mild to severe and often overlap with other conditions and/or disabilities.

What Strategies Can I Use to Help Students in My Class Thrive?

- Reduce auditory and visual distractions in the room. Extraneous noises and visual clutter interfere with the student’s ability to listen, follow directions and know what information to attend to.
- Prepare children so they know when it is time to listen. Cue them (e.g., call their name, give a verbal cue) and encourage them to look at you. You can also give children a nonverbal signal, such as pointing to your ear.
- Keep directions short and simple.
- Use natural gestures to give students added cues about what you want them to do.
- Speak clearly and slowly. A slower speaking rate with pauses between ideas will help students understand what you want them to do. Emphasize important parts of directions.
- The child may have difficulty with social and conversational skills. Teach the language to use in specific social situations, such as:
  - Greeting people and starting a conversation
  - Asking and answering questions
  - Asking for help or clarification.
• Explicitly teach social skills related to communication, such as how to read body language and expressions. Use direct instruction along with modelling, storytelling, role-play and social scripts.
• Provide support in transitioning from one camp activity or place to another. Cues, routines and visual reminders may be helpful so that the child understands what needs to be done during specific transitions.
References


