

Resource page for tutoring students with learning disabilities

Learning disabilities (LDs) affect how the brain processes information. Specifically, a learning disability can affect how one acquires, retains, organizes, understands, and interprets information. LDs are not to be confused with intellectual disabilities which impact one's intelligence and ability to function independently.

The top 5 most common learning disorders are **ADHD** (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder), **Dyslexia**, **Auditory Processing Disorder** (APD), **Dyscalculia** (typically co-morbid with Dyslexia or ADHD), and **Dyspraxia**

ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder)-- the CDC estimates that approximately 11% of school-aged students have ADHD. Students with ADHD may struggle with hyperactivity, difficulty paying attention to activities or conversations, difficulty completing tasks, difficulty waiting/being patient, regularly interrupting, excessive chatting, and difficulty organizing.

How can you as the tutor support a student with ADHD?

- Reduce distractions: find a quiet place to work where the student won't be distracted by surroundings
- Positive reinforcement: notice when your student *is* being present and participating and let them know you see them making an effort
- Stick to a routine: students with ADHD benefit from a regular routine because they feel in control and are less likely to be distracted
- [Mindfulness practice](#): incorporate a mindfulness activity at the beginning of your session to bring the student's attention to their mind and body and prepare them for an hour of working/studying
- Visual aids: to-do lists, visual schedules, and flashcards can help students with ADHD understand their goals for the session-- if they have access to visual aids, they don't have to keep mental tabs on what is expected of them
- Breaks: allow your student to give their brain and body a break to recharge. Processing information can be fatiguing so incorporating "body breaks" is a great way to keep your student motivated and ready to learn.

Dyslexia-- a language-based learning disability that affects how a person reads and writes. Students with dyslexia may struggle with matching letters to sounds, reading aloud, and spelling.

How can you as the tutor support a student with dyslexia?

- [Multi-sensory activities](#): these activities utilize the senses so students can take a break from a single style of learning. Ex. A student can learn to count by looking at a number line (visual learning) or by counting physical objects (tactile learning).
- Positive reinforcement: praise hard work even if the student has not achieved full accuracy yet. Correct answers are not the only way a student can show improvement. Are they making an effort? Are they asking questions? Are they making connections? Celebrate that! When a student's confidence is up, they will perform better.
- [Dyslexie](#): a dyslexic graphic designer named Christian Boer developed a font called Dyslexie specifically to improve reading skills in people with dyslexia. The linked website has a [Dyslexie workspace](#) that can be added to a Chromebook, Apple or Windows

computer, or tablet, integrating the Dyslexie font into documents, spreadsheets, and presentations.

- [Bookshare](#): an e-book library that can be customized according to your student's needs. Listen to books; follow along with karaoke-style highlighting; or read in braille, large font, or other formats on devices of your choice -- computers, Chromebooks, tablets, smartphones, assistive technology devices, and more. Free for qualified U.S. students and schools.
- [General tips](#), plus specific recs for supporting comprehension, fluency, vocab, writing, and visual challenges.

Auditory Processing Disorder (APD): People with APD struggle with identifying sounds because their ears do not communicate with their brain properly. Essentially, people with APD do not have trouble *hearing*, they struggle to process and understand what they've heard. It is especially difficult for people with APD to identify sounds in speech when there is background noise (like in a classroom or other public space.) People with APD will most likely be visual or tactile learners.

How can you as the tutor support your student with APD?

- Visual aids: Students with APD will benefit from visual aids that represent their agenda and objectives. If your student cannot read yet, visual aids with icons or pictures would work best. If you are doing an activity with your student, make sure to bring a print out of directions/steps or write it down for them.
- Speak slowly and clearly: Face your student and make sure they can see your mouth and eyes as you speak to allow for optimal understanding. Don't use more words than is necessary so as to not overload your student's brain with ideas to process. Reassure your student that they can ask you to repeat instructions at any point.
- Check for understanding: Ask your student to repeat words, phrases, and sentences back to you to ensure they understand. If they feel confident, you can swap roles and let the student teach you what they've been working on! This is a great way to build confidence and ensure your student understands the subject matter.

Dyscalculia: This LD is usually co-morbid with Dyslexia or ADHD. 'Comorbidities' refers to the presence of two or more diseases or medical conditions. People with dyscalculia struggle with memorizing arithmetic facts, making calculations, and mathematical reasoning.

How can you as the tutor support your student with dyscalculia?

- Mathematical vocabulary: Review and explain mathematical terms often to ensure your student can understand and explain mathematical concepts.
- Visual aids: Use models, tools, and graph paper. Students with dyscalculia will struggle with mental math. Show them how to represent mathematical equations using pictures or models.
 - This [edutopia article](#) details ways you can teach math using pictures

Dyspraxia: People with dyspraxia experience delayed development in fine motor skills. Children will appear clumsy or uncoordinated compared to other students in their age group. They may struggle with writing or typing and may require extra time to copy down notes.

- Skill building: focus on building motor skills like writing and typing by performing the task for them to observe and then letting them repeat it back to you. Younger students may need help learning [how to hold a pencil](#). You could begin the session by reviewing their motor skills (writing, typing, hand-eye-coordination) before jumping into tutoring.
- Focus on their strengths: Students can become frustrated if they feel like they are not understanding something that feels easier to other people. Boost their confidence by focusing on what they *can* do.
- Repetitions: Repeat directions and processes to ensure retention. Try to repeat directions in the same cadence and with the same words/phrases so the student can memorize them to remind themselves when you are not with them.

Tutoring resources for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn and behave. Autism is referred to as a 'spectrum disorder' because the severity and type of symptoms vary from person to person. There are 5 different subcategories of autism including Asperger's syndrome, Rett syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder, Kanner's syndrome, and PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified); a diagnosis for people who exhibit autism-like behaviors but do not meet the criteria for an autism or Asperger's diagnosis. It is for this reason that it is important to get to know your student as an individual because although two people may have the same diagnosis, they may have different strengths and challenges.

Students with autism may have trouble making friends at school as it is difficult for them to relate to others. They may also struggle with emotional regulation which can be misconstrued as "poor behavior." Adults who work with students on the autism spectrum should maintain a positive and patient demeanor when the student becomes dysregulated. They should help the child understand *why* they are feeling upset and give them tools to self-regulate or self-soothe.

*Please see this [school community toolkit](#) from [autismspeaks.org](#) for a comprehensive guide to supporting students with autism. A name, email, and zip code are required to access and download the pdf. *NO PURCHASE REQUIRED*

Getting to know your student with autism spectrum disorder

People with autism will often have very specific interests and routines. Talk to them about what they like: favorite show or movie character, favorite school subject, or something they would like to learn about. Try and find something you have in common! Once you get a sense of the things they are interested in, try incorporating them into your tutoring session. Once you can connect with your student over a common interest or experience, they are more likely to open up and feel comfortable asking questions.

Potential triggers for students with autism spectrum disorder

Changes in routine

Children with autism are very sensitive to changes in their routine so unexpected circumstances can derail their day completely. It is for this reason that tutors and teachers should give their students with autism a heads-up before they try something new so the student can be

emotionally and physically prepared. Although this heads-up can be very helpful, it will not always be sufficient so be patient and flexible with your student. Try to alter the activity so it can be more accessible to them.

Unclear instructions/lack of structure

It is very difficult for people with autism to participate in activities that are unfamiliar to them. In other words, they don't tend to try new things. Students with autism benefit from clear instructions so they know exactly what to expect from an activity. If you are planning an activity for your student, give them a detailed explanation of what is expected of them, focusing on the positive/fun aspects of the activity.

Demands

Many students with autism experience [pathological demand avoidance \(PDA\)](#) resulting in behavior that comes off as defiant or disrespectful. It is important to give *positive reminders* by avoiding words like "don't" or "stop." Students with autism benefit from understanding *why* specific rules are in place.

- *Example:* A student is running in an area where they are meant to walk. Instead of saying "Stop running!" Try "Please walk so you don't hurt yourself!" to let them know you care about their safety and that is why you are requesting that they walk.

Similarly, if a student is avoiding work, offer a reward or give them a choice between a few different activities so they feel in control of the situation. Children who have PDA will often succumb to anxiety or panic attacks if they feel like they are being forced to do something— even if it is as simple as putting materials away after an activity. When you are transitioning from activity to activity, try using phrases like "would you rather work on ____ or ____?" or "how do you feel about doing _____?" instead of deciding for them.

Loud noises/Sensory issues

Children with autism can be sensitive to loud noises. Things like crowded rooms, electrical buzzing, echoes, and music can be distracting and disruptive to your student. It is important to pay attention to your student's [sensory issues](#). For example, if you are tutoring in a public space, it might be overwhelming for your student to try and listen to you while there are other conversations happening around them. Work with your student, family, and CEP staff partner to find an adequate space for tutoring.

Deescalation strategies

While the tips above can certainly help, sometimes situations escalate and a different approach is necessary. Deescalation strategies help you calm both yourself and your student during times of crisis or heightened stress. Hopefully your knowledge of potential triggers will help you avoid such situations but in the event a student has escalated a situation and you need to control it, here are some tips:

1. **Remain non-judgmental and empathetic:** Students want to feel heard and seen so even if you don't understand their point of view, it is important to be impartial and hear your student out. Depending on the age of the student, they might not fully understand how to manage their emotions yet so reassure them that their big feelings are normal and they won't last forever. Let them know that you hear them and you care about their feelings and opinions.

2. **Avoid big reactions:** Model the behavior you'd like to see in your student by keeping yourself calm and responding in a normal tone. While you might instinctively raise your voice in stressful situations, the goal is to *deescalate* the situation so take a moment to compose yourself and respond calmly.
3. **Set boundaries:** While we as adults have more capacity for stress than young children do, we still have our limits. If a student is raising their voice at you or challenging you in some way, causing you to feel overwhelmed, be honest with your student. Let them know that you want to help them but you can't until they lower their voice. Avoid matching their loud/angry energy which will only escalate the situation more.
4. **Check your body language:** Let's say you've exhausted tips 1-3 and your student is still escalating the situation. Take a look at their body language and then your own. Are you standing or sitting? Are your arms crossed in front of you? Is your jaw clenched? Your body language says a lot about how you are feeling. Take a moment to relax your face, hands and body. Try sitting at the same level as your student to let them know that even though you are the adult and they are the child, you are working together to get through this tough time. Ask them to mirror your body language so that they too can start to feel more calm and comfortable.
5. **Know when to stop:** If you find yourself going in circles and nothing is deescalating the situation, find a way to remove yourself or the student from the space. Sometimes we all simply need a break. Revisit the issue later when everyone has had a chance to cool off. This can be as simple as suggesting a bathroom break or you can ask the student's guardian or your CEP staff partner to come support. Take care of you!