

Teaching Strategies to improve Classroom Performance



Each child with Spina Bifida and/or Hydrocephalus is different and therefore should have a teaching/training programme which is specifically designed to meet the individual needs of the child. How a child with Spina Bifida and/or Hydrocephalus may be assisted to attain optimal potential is dependent on a structured, strategic classroom programme. The learning process may be slow but substantial progress can be made through patience and perseverance both on part of the child and the teacher. Teaching strategies should include:

- Understand the specific needs – an awareness of Hydrocephalus and its affect on cognitive functioning and learning.
- Observe, Recognise and Identify needs and problem areas, difficulties they experience. In order that appropriate remedial action be taken.
- Inform staff/class etc. so that there is an understanding of the medical condition. Be aware of physical symptoms e.g. drowsiness, lethargy, complaints of headache due to shunt problems/blockage. The child may feel hot and flushed indicating a urinary tract infection.
- Select seating partners carefully.
- Encourage the child to do what he/she can do for himself/herself and explain to the class why this should be the case. (Children must not learn to become dependent).
- Keep an eye on toileting arrangements. Ensure cleanliness and hygiene rules are followed. Allow sufficient time for child to carry out self-catheterisation in private. Be discreet.
- Where possible, develop hand skills (manual dexterity, motor control). Bear in mind these children lack in early practice in manipulative skills.
- Encourage correct body posture and use of arms and hands to produce neater work. Table height should be at a suitable level and ensure wheelchair brakes are on to improve stability when child is working at the table.
- Learn to read body language e.g. facial expressions, as this will indicate if child has understood.
- Check with child what he/she sees “visually”. You may be able to pinpoint a specific difficulty.
- Train child to attend selectively to specific attributes of the stimulus/cues.
- Develop appreciation of the 3-dimensional world (contributing factor to poor drawing skills).
- Develop spatial judgements in relation to distance, direction, size, and position. An understanding of “quantity” (a necessary requisite for learning arithmetic).
- If a rich “spatial” and “temporal” programme is pursued in the primary school there may be fewer problems at the secondary stage.

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- If a child has figure-ground discrimination problems or is easily distracted by irrelevant stimuli on a page, use simplified teaching material.
- Develop observational skills by encouraging the child to pay particular attention to “details” necessary in science and technology and other classroom activities.
- Impress to their strengths. These children have good auditory skills. Use verbalization in number work, learning to write. The child should relate what he/she is saying to what he/she is doing. This will help reinforce the learning.
- Due to poor short-term memory and sequencing difficulties, they are likely to forget instructions. Use short simple words, repetition and reminders such as notes, checklists, and pictures. Use “association” technique e.g. words, situations and simple habit training to reinforce learning.
- Help the child to learn the memory and thinking skills that develop and come naturally to others. The child needs to learn to “stop and think” before acting.
- Check out listening memory. Keep instructions brief, worded positively and to the point. Avoid using the word “Don’t” because the extra time wasted processing means the most important part of the instruction is ignored.
- The child may have difficulty in focusing attention selectively, in inhibiting responses to competing stimuli and in maintaining attention on a particular item. So they may actively seek out distraction from a task which they cannot cope with. They may do this by suddenly introducing quite unrelated topics of conversation. A structured teaching programme combats distractibility. Deal with distractibility quickly and modify behaviour by using a systematic strategy.
- Sheer physical tiredness can result in poor motivation and passivity. Remember their tolerance towards coping all day will not be as high as their able-bodied peer-group. This tiredness can often be accentuated by poor general health. These children can be extremely tired. Other contributing factors like poor hand control, perceptual or visuo-motor difficulties may make a task seem too difficult and inevitably results in the child giving up easily.
- Where possible reduce demands for instance lower the standards for acceptable handwriting especially when time pressures are imposed e.g. when doing exams/tests.
- Reduce the amount of written work by introducing photocopied handouts especially in relation to number work to overcome the burden of sheer mechanics of copying out the sums. If practice in computation is the aim hand out sheets where they have to fill in just the answers.
- Look at enjoyable ways of developing higher level skills relating to perception, concept formation and abstract reasoning. Success can be achieved once

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the training exercise is motivating and appealing to the child and doesn't seem like hard work.

- Children with Spina Bifida and/or Hydrocephalus are sociable, out-going and enjoy having duties which makes a definite contribution to the class and where they feel "important". Give them tasks, which are interesting to them and at the same time permits skill practice in areas where there is weakness.
- Some children with Hydrocephalus are not used to expressing their feelings; they require plenty of opportunities to learn to do this.
- There may be a difficulty with non-verbal communication, "reading" the body language of others and reacting appropriately. The number of social roles they have learned is very limited and they tend not to "switch" between these roles as easily as other children. They are unable to recognize a situation and use what is appropriate communication. Teach the child what is socially acceptable behaviour and how to behave appropriately in different situations. Social skills are only learned through active social interaction and it is also through mature participation that a child can gain expertise and competency.
- Teach the child to generalise the skills learned to other tasks. Help the child to apply their skills to educational tasks. Once a new task has been mastered, its applicability to other situations must be shown to apply in a large number of different situations. One of their major difficulties is transferring skills to a new environment.
- Classroom programmes should incorporate a systematic, structured approach. The exercise should be graded and sometimes broken down into smaller, easy steps. The programme should be specifically designed to meet the special needs of the child.
- Provide an opportunity for the child to improve and apply their perceptual and spatial skills.
- A healthy liaison between teacher and parent is absolutely crucial towards assisting the child to manage physically, socially, emotionally and psychologically in the classroom. Be aware of frustration and tackle problems immediately.

A good teacher-parent relationship is advisable especially in cases where the learning and training must be continued on in the home environment. The teacher should not stand alone in dealing with the child. The teacher should be prepared to liaise with other professionals involved in the management of the child e.g. educational psychologists, occupational therapists etc. Contact with the relevant disability association information, in this case, Spina Bifida Hydrocephalus, Family Support Worker, will provide

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further support in understanding a very complex but interesting medical condition. Teaching a child with Spina Bifida and/or Hydrocephalus can be a very challenging and rewarding experience. To an interested teacher, the working of the human brain (with Hydrocephalus) can be rather fascinating and full of intrigue.

The school environment has a very important role to play not only in term of educational attainment but also in preparing the child with Spina Bifida and/or Hydrocephalus for adulthood and a better future.