

# Horizons

Developmental Resource Center

## Support Strategies for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, AD/HD, Learning Disabilities, and Other Neurodevelopmental Disorders In the School Setting



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## Introduction

Working with parents and educators for over 15 years has taught me some important lessons about what it means to provide a meaningful education to students with Autism, ADHD, and other neurodevelopmental disorders. It is easy to get bogged down in the moment-to-moment challenges and lose perspective on what we are trying to accomplish. Too often we employ strategies that address an immediate problem, without figuring out how to build the foundations that are required for addressing the challenge over the long-term. In searching for the elusive “quick fix” we fail to implement some basic but powerful concepts that support learning for all students.

Before I share specific strategies, here are 12 important concepts I believe every parent and professional should consider when designing appropriate educational opportunities for students with neurodevelopmental disorders:

**Attitude:** Your attitude is the most important tool you bring to your work with students. You do not need previous experience teaching students with neurodevelopmental disorders in order to be successful with them, but you do need to build trust through acceptance, patience, mutual respect, and a willingness to learn.

**Remediation and Compensation:** Strategies that solve a problem in the short term may not create significant change in the long term. A balance of short-term and long-term strategies is needed for students to be truly successful.

**Relationships are Essential:** We learn and grow through our relationships with others. Behavioral and emotional self-regulation begins with engaging in meaningful interactions. Very little can be accomplished with any student if trusting and supportive relationships are not developed.

**Our Communication is a Powerful Tool:** Speaking and communicating are two very different things. The ways in which we use verbal and nonverbal communication has a significant impact on students' communication development.

**Processing:** Neurodevelopmental disorders impact students' abilities to take in, make sense of, and respond to information. We need to learn to slow down to speed up in order to support and improve their processing.

**Promoting Independence, Thinking, and Problem Solving:** The most important outcome of the educational process is to teach students to think. We need to create daily opportunities for students to think about and flexibly respond to what is happening around them. Reducing prompt dependence and increasing flexible and independent thinking must be a priority.

**Environments Make a Difference:** The physical environment plays a significant role in student success. We need to take the time to observe and understand how the physical environment is impacting student functioning.

**Promoting Competence:** Students who feel incompetent do not learn and thrive. It is crucial to find ways to help all students have meaningful roles in the classroom, help them know they are supported, and send the message that we know they are capable.

**Diagnostic Labels:** The names we give students, classrooms, and programs are far less important than understanding their unique characteristics. It is easy to give children labels, and much more challenging to understand what really makes them tick so as to best support them. Labels should be viewed as a beginning, not an endpoint.

**Obstacles:** Everyone has obstacles—challenges that impact their ability to function at their best. The responsibility for identifying and resolving behavior obstacles and challenges lies much more with adults than it does with students.

**Families as Partners:** Parents are the primary players in the growth and development of their children. Professionals and families must be more than a team for the purpose of completing required paperwork. A working relationship based on trust and mutual respect is required for students to reach their highest potential.

**Collective Visions:** Having a vision of what constitutes a satisfying quality of life for students and their families allows us to create educational plans that accomplish meaningful outcomes. Shared visions created by parents and professionals provide a powerful map for moving forward.

Approaching the education of students with neurodevelopmental disorders with these 12 powerful concepts in mind provides a more meaningful and successful experience for everyone involved. Application of these principles allows us to best guide students to reach their highest potential in school and beyond.

Now that you have a framework of fundamental concepts for working with these students, let's dive into specific strategies that can be implemented in the school environment.

These tips and strategies address some of the most common issues that arise in school settings for students with neurodevelopmental disorders. These strategies are compensations for the underlying developmental skills these students lack, and will not treat the core issues themselves. However, they have been successfully utilized in a wide variety of educational environments to reduce stress and improve student functioning. You are encouraged to select the strategies that best align with the strengths, needs, and personality of each individual student.

## Transition Challenges

*\*Students transition better when they understand what will happen and when things will happen.*

1. Provide a visual schedule to prepare the child for the day's activities. Allow the child to cross out / remove activities as they are completed. Use photos, drawings, symbols, or words depending on developmental level and reading ability of the student. The schedule can be provided on the board for the entire class or at the student's desk for personal use.
2. Use a timer to signal the beginning and end of activities. Visual timers are available that do not make any noise.
3. Provide advance warning for transitions (ex: Work time will be done in 5 minutes).
4. Provide advance warning for schedule changes (ex: The assembly is cancelled for this afternoon so we will be playing board games instead.). Use the visual schedule to make changes.
5. Provide opportunities to practice making changes during non-stressful times. Make small changes to the daily routines and schedules so the student becomes more accustomed to coping with change. These changes should be small at first, and can increase as the students can manage.

## Recess Challenges

*\*Students participate better when they have some structure regarding peers and activities that are available, and have an opportunity to “recharge” that works for them.*

1. Consider restructuring recess, rather than taking it away as a consequence for having problems during that time. Many students need the active recess time to help keep them regulated.
2. Provide a peer or small group of peers to play with the child at recess.
3. Have the child choose the activity s/he will participate in prior to going outside. Help the child by providing a list of activities that are available if needed.
4. If the outdoor environment is overwhelming for the student, provide a space indoors for recess activities. This could be a space for quiet activities the student prefers, such as reading, or a place for more active play. The goal of recess should be for each student to get some downtime to “recharge”, and this can look different for each student.

## Challenges with Frustration / Over-load / Meltdowns

*\*Students feel more secure knowing there is a way they can calm themselves and regain control.*

1. Analyze the times, places, etc. where the child is having meltdowns. Make accommodations as necessary during those times to prevent issues of frustration or overload. It may be necessary to remove some activities initially, and add them back in one at a time as the student's ability to cope increases. The primary goal is to reduce stress so the child can better cope and function.
2. Provide a quiet space or "safe spot" for the child to go when s/he needs a break. Make sure the child understand what the space is to be used for and how to access that space (ask the teacher, use a break card, etc.). Use a timer to transition the child back into classroom activities if needed.
3. Change the child's environment – run an errand to the office, get a drink from the fountain, take a walk, etc.
4. Provide the child with a set number of passes or break cards to use when s/he is feeling frustrated or overwhelmed. These passes can be used to access a quiet space, take a walk in the hall, etc.
5. Allow the child to use a stress ball or other sensory tool to assist with calming.
6. Stay quiet and calm with the student, no matter how upset s/he becomes. Adults must model emotional and behavioral regulation themselves, and the student must know that someone else is in control even when s/he is feeling out of control. Do not attempt to force the student to do anything while s/he is upset, and wait to discuss the issue until s/he is calm.

## Challenges With Following Directions and Routines

*\*Students follow directions and complete routines better when they don't have to rely solely on their auditory processing skills.*

1. Break the instructions into smaller pieces / explain the process step-by-step as you go along.
2. Write the directions on the board or on a piece of paper for the student to have at their desk.
3. For classroom routines, provide the student with a checklist of things s/he need to do (ex: routine for starting the morning).
4. Once a direction is given, pause and allow the student some time to process and take action before providing additional prompts or cues.

## Sensitivity to Environmental Stimuli

*\*Students participate better and complete more work independently if environmental stimuli aren't competing for their attention.*

1. Allow the student to wear headphones or ear plugs during loud activities.
2. Provide the child with their own private "office space" during work activities – stand a folder up on their desk to block out visual stimuli, sit at a desk in a quieter area of the room, etc.
3. Reduce the use of overhead florescent lights, if possible. Reduce other overhead sources of distraction, including artwork and other décor hanging from the ceiling.
4. Provide the student with seating alternatives such as a beanbag chair, ball chair, space to lay on the floor or stand at a counter, etc.

## **Student's activity level is too high or too low**

*\*Students can better regulate their activity levels throughout the day when provided with appropriate physical activities.*

1. Allow the student to take physical activity breaks during the day (take a walk, do some stretches as a class, run an errand, etc.)
2. Provide the student with sensory tools such as a stress ball, seat cushion, stretch band, fidget toy, etc. to help appropriately manage his/her energy levels.
3. Provide the child with a "Pace Space" in the back of the classroom where they can stand / pace during instruction. Use tape on the floor to visually define the area, if needed.
4. Use activities to strengthen the brain-body connection and improve focus. Some options for accomplishing this include: Brain Gym, yoga, Bal-A-Vis-X, deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, sensory integration activities, and many others.

## Challenges with Social Rules / Social Activities

*\*Students can follow rules for social behaviors and engage with peers more appropriately when provided with concrete rules and structure for activities.*

1. Use reminder / cue cards to reinforce social rules (ex: raise your hand).
2. Make a rule list or book with the child that highlights the specific social rules the child is having difficulty with. Pictures can aid with comprehension.
3. Assign roles for individuals during group work activities. Write down the rules for working in groups (no interrupting, talk in a quiet voice, etc.)
4. "Caught You" Cards – Decide on a specific social rule or skill to highlight with the class for a period of time (usually a week or more). When you see a student exhibiting that skill they receive a "Caught You" card. Students write their name on the back and enter their cards in a drawing for a prize, free time, etc. This is a positive way to help a specific student practice social skills without singling them out.
5. Marble Jar – Same idea as above, except each time you see a student practicing the skill appropriately you drop a marble in a jar. When the jar is full, the class wins a prize.
6. Provide a peer or small group of peers to engage with the student during unstructured times.
7. Encourage the child to become involved with extra-curricular activities that align with his/her interest areas.

## Challenges with Organization

*\*Students are more likely to stay organized when the system provides visual cues and when organizational skills are directly taught and practiced.*

1. Provide labeled containers (boxes, binders, etc.) to help the student know where materials and papers belong.
2. Label areas of the student's locker or cubby to spotlight where to put their belongings.
3. Many students with organizational difficulties need instruction on what can be thrown away and what needs to be kept. Set aside a weekly cleaning / organization time when an adult (or a peer for older students) can assist the student with sorting through papers and organizing materials.
4. Teach the student to use a planner for keeping track of assignments and other responsibilities. Daily checks of the planner may be necessary to teach consistent use of the planner. Be flexible with planner use and continue to work with the student to adjust the system until it works for him/her.

## Challenges with Written Expression

*\*Students can more easily process information and organize their responses when they don't have to focus on the motor task of writing.*

1. Note Taking
  - Allow the student access to copies of another student's notes (carbon notebooks could be used).
  - Provide a copy of the overhead notes for the student to follow along with and highlight throughout the lecture.
  - Provide a scribe to take notes.
  - Provide a "fill-in-the-blank" format for students to take notes.
2. Allow the student to use a computer, tablet, or other device during writing activities.
3. Use visual organizers, mind maps, and other types of graphic organizers to help students gather and organize their thoughts at the start of the writing process.
4. The Handwriting Without Tears curriculum, and other programs that teach handwriting in a developmentally appropriate fashion, may be beneficial for teaching and practicing handwriting skills.
5. Provide other ways for students to show what they know – take tests verbally, draw pictures or diagrams, make a poster, create a mind map, etc.

I hope these strategies have provided you with some new ideas of how you can support and encourage students with neurodevelopmental disorders in school settings. Remember – the most important thing you can provide them is an attitude of willingness to understand their strengths and challenges, and a commitment to keep trying until you figure out what works.

If you are a parent and would like additional support with school strategies or other needs, you are welcome to contact my office and schedule a free 15-minute phone consultation. During that call you will have the opportunity to share your needs and concerns, and one of our clinicians will provide suggestions and guidance for the next steps you can take to improve your child's development. Contact our office at (616) 698-0306 or [info@horizonsdrc.com](mailto:info@horizonsdrc.com) to schedule your free phone consultation today. It's a phone call that can literally change your child and family for the better!

I wish you much joy and success as you continue to support your children and students in reaching their highest potential.

My best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Nicole".

Nicole Beurkens, PhD  
Founder and Director  
Horizons DRC