

ADDRESSING ATTENTION DIFFICULTIES IN STUDENTS WITH NF1

Learning difficulties represent one of the most common and challenging complications of Neurofibromatosis Type 1 (NF1), which can be exacerbated by attention problems such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Research shows that approximately 40% of children with NF1 meet diagnostic criteria for ADHD. For these children, they have significant difficulties concentrating, and some (but not all), will also be impulsive (act before thinking) and hyperactive (fidgety, hard to keep still).

ADHD often impacts on school learning for children with NF1.

For example, children may:

- Not follow through on instructions;
- Not listen when they are spoken to;
- Become distracted by peripheral things;
- Avoid mentally demanding tasks, like writing or maths;
- Look for distractions to take their attention away from the task at hand.



In addition to affecting learning at school, these difficulties can also affect relationships with friends and life at home.

While many children with attention difficulties (alongside their NF1 diagnosis) meet diagnostic criteria for ADHD, there are more who do not have a formal diagnosis. It is just as important that these students (and their teachers) keep in mind how their attention deficit may affect their learning across all academic areas including reading, spelling and maths.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN PROGRAM PLANNING

Below are a number of options you could consider as part of your program and could make a huge difference to the learning of a student with diagnosed or undiagnosed attention difficulties.



Just another symptom of NF1. Inattentiveness and hyperactivity when it exists is often regretted but a student impacted in these ways is unable to stop the behaviour.



Understanding disruptive behaviour. Students with NF1 and attention difficulties are not trying to be disruptive and are often unaware of their distracting behaviour.



Positive reinforcement and consistency. Be consistent with rules they understand and provide positive reinforcement. Steer away from highlighting negative consequences in order to develop good rapport and ultimately improve their learning.



Challenges of not having a diagnosis. A diagnosis of ADHD allows for the possibility of medication to support learning, but sometimes it is not suitable or parents have opted out. For those without a diagnosis, the likelihood of taking medication decreases significantly.



Consider implementing a homework diary for the class. Stress the importance of writing down assignment requirements, important dates and bringing home materials needed to complete tasks

CLASSROOM ADJUSTMENTS

Parents and teachers can help children manage their attention symptoms by using a range of positive strategies at home and in the classroom. This can include:



Providing **one-on-one instruction** as often as possible



Keeping instructions short and simple



Sitting the student towards the **front of the classroom** and away from students or things that are distracting



Providing **breaks** for students, especially during exams or assessment tasks



Having a **fixed routine** and keeping classroom activities well organised and predictable



Providing **peace and quiet**. Allow students to take their exams or complete assessment tasks in a quiet space



For younger students, a **“class buddy”** can be helpful to redirect their attention, reinforce instructions and assist their learning.



Providing students with a **breakdown of the task** they are completing or a checklist, so that they know what they need to do.

Remember, their behaviour in the classroom is not a reflection on your teaching ability, but a daily struggle for the student. Your patience, perseverance and some reasonable adjustments to the classroom will benefit the student immensely.

If after trying these strategies have been implemented and the student's symptoms continue to have a significant impact their learning (and life), we would recommend speak with their parents about the possibility of medication.

For more information and resources, you can contact the Children's Tumour Foundation directly.

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