

KS1-2

Dyslexia

Supporting neurodiversity

SEND
TOOLKIT



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Introduction

This toolkit is designed to give you a general overview of neurodiversities, how they affect children, and how to recognise them within children in your classroom. The main focus is to look at what dyslexia is and how it affects young learners. Dyslexia is a complex and varied condition that impacts various processing skills and consequently children's outcomes.

The first section gives a rundown of current research on dyslexia, and then links to how it can be defined, how it manifests in learners and how it can be identified. There are activities that can help you as a teacher to qualify your professional knowledge of dyslexia in the classroom, and activities that can help learners to articulate their own areas of challenge and learning preferences, as well as presentation resources to help others understand dyslexia and its impacts. The subsequent sections of this guide offer insight into the different areas of processing and attainment that are commonly affected by dyslexia. The effects of dyslexia on children's memory and sequencing, reading, writing, spelling and maths are explained and linked to common classroom behaviours/responses to tasks. Tips and strategies for general classroom teaching are given, with printable materials for use with your children. Additional reading suggestions, alongside links to research articles and organisational websites, are given to signpost you to further sources of information about dyslexia and support for young people in school.

About the author



Dr Helen Ross is a leading voice on dyslexia within UK education. She is an experienced public speaker, international consultant and researcher, and contributor to a wide range of publications; Helen is also dyslexic.

Helen's passion for supporting young people with dyslexia and literacy difficulties started early in her teaching career when she worked in some challenging but invigorating schools in South Yorkshire. Some of Helen's students found literacy, and engaging with the written word, very challenging. Helen's passion for supporting young people who find learning tricky continued, and she now supports families, teachers and organisations to better understand the implications of dyslexia, neurodiversity and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

In this toolkit, Helen draws on her experiences as a classroom teacher, SENDCo and dyslexia expert to help you to understand what dyslexia is, which aspects of learning can be affected by dyslexia and what you can do to support dyslexic learners. Whatever your role in supporting young people with dyslexia, this toolkit will give you understanding, tangible ideas and practical support strategies to enable those young people to flourish.



Emma Rossiter has supported the adaptation of this toolkit to support primary aged learners. Emma is a senior leader, experienced trainer, and highly respected SEN consultant with over 15 years' experience and dedicated expertise working with children and young adults with special education needs. Emma leads Silverwood School's SEND Support and Training Service.

From Emma's various roles held in education including Head of Learning, Deputy Headteacher, SENCO, specialist teacher for students with autism and other SEND needs, English Teacher in a comprehensive school, and parent of children with neurodiversity, Emma brings a unique set of insights and expertise.

'I feel very fortunate to be in a place where I can make a real difference to the lives of young people every single day and contribute to an inclusive and ever-improving society.'

Silverwood SEND Support and Training provides a much-valued service to local authorities, schools, FE and HE providers, families, and pupils. From delivering group INSET training around supporting students with SEND, to offering personalised support for staff members working with a challenging learner – Silverwood School is passionate about empowering a culture of collaboration and inclusion.

What is neurodiversity?

by Abigail Hawkins and Helen Ross

The term *neurodiversity* was coined in the early 1990s by journalist Harvey Blume and Australian autism activist Judy Singer. It can be defined as an understanding that neurological differences are to be honoured and respected just like any other human variation, including diversity in race, ethnicity, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, and so on (Armstrong, 2017).

When Singer originally coined the phrase, she was looking to move thinking from a medical model to a more social one. She wanted everyone to understand that there is no 'typical' brain or 'normal' mind and that everyone is different as part of regular human variation.

This standpoint has major implications for how we, as teachers, work to support young people in our care. Understanding and accepting that there are young people whose way of processing and engaging with the world is different from our own means that we, as professionals working to support them, need to update our knowledge and practice.

Although the term originated within the autism community, *neurodiversity* is now taken as encompassing a range of medical and educational needs, including ADHD, autistic spectrum condition (ASC) or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), dyslexia, dysgraphia,

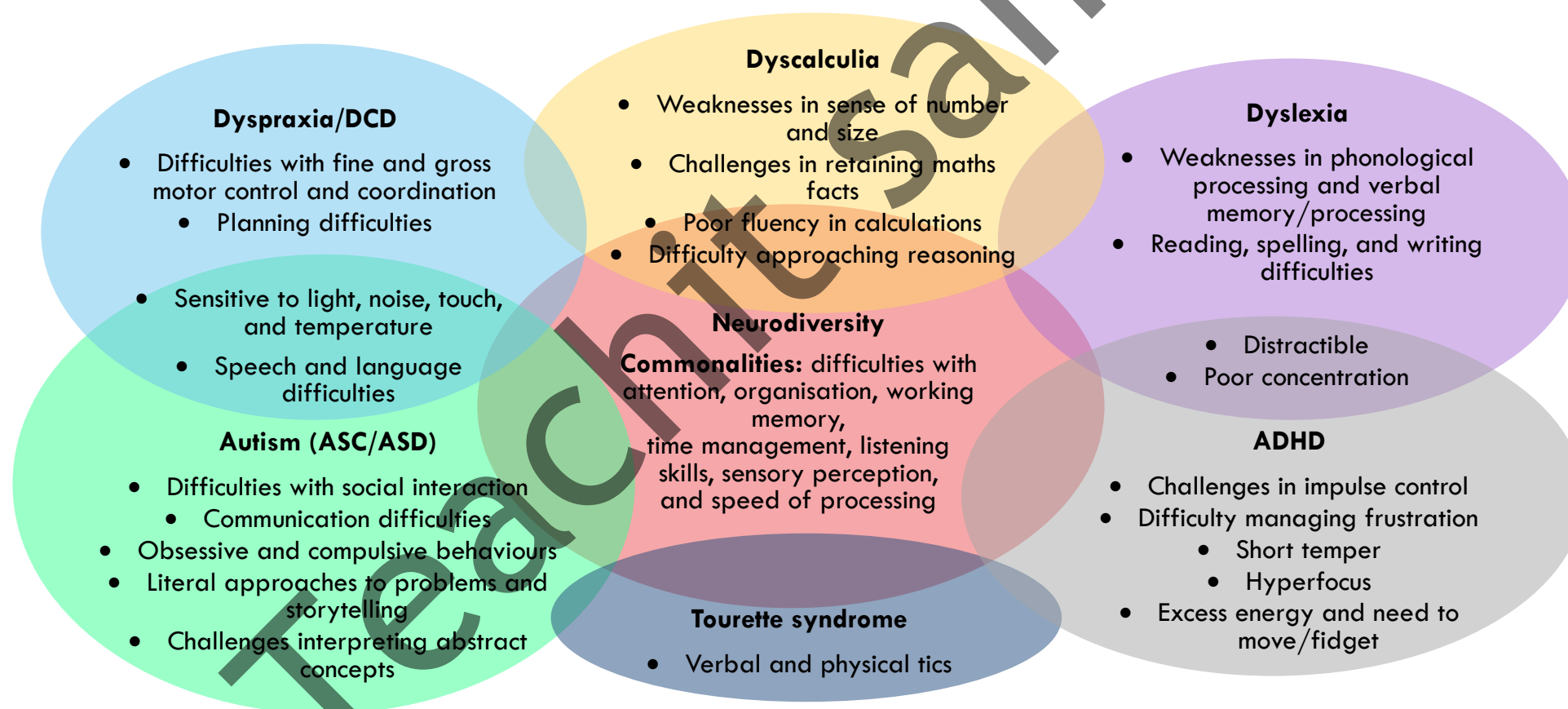
dyspraxia / developmental coordination disorder (DCD), dyscalculia and Tourette syndrome. Specific language impairment or developmental language delay may also be included. These needs are also referred to as *specific learning difficulties* (SpLD) as they affect the way in which information is learned and processed. All neurodiversities are independent of intelligence, are lifelong conditions that are likely to run in families and can vary in degree from one individual to the next.

Neurodiverse children may need some accommodations in school so that they can engage meaningfully in the curriculum and in wider social life. These accommodations may include wearing headphones to minimise sensory overload or having a coloured overlay when reading to reduce visual discomfort and imbalance. In school, some young people may need fidget toys or wobble cushions as an outlet for their need to move associated with ADHD, whilst others may need to have access to quiet spaces to reset because of ASD and other sensory needs. Those with dyslexia may need to have support in accessing the written word, whilst individuals with dyscalculia might find that having concrete objects to support them whilst engaging with maths problems transforms their ability to share their knowledge and understanding of those challenges they face.

The identifying features of various neurodiversities, and their commonalities, are shown below in a diagram adapted from the one created by Mary Colley, founder of the UK Developmental Adult Neurodiversity Association (DANDA). However, it is important to consider that this diagram focuses on the negative aspects of neurodiversity, and, whilst this is important for pinpointing what children need to support them, there are also many positive attributes associated with neurodiversity and neurodiverse individuals.

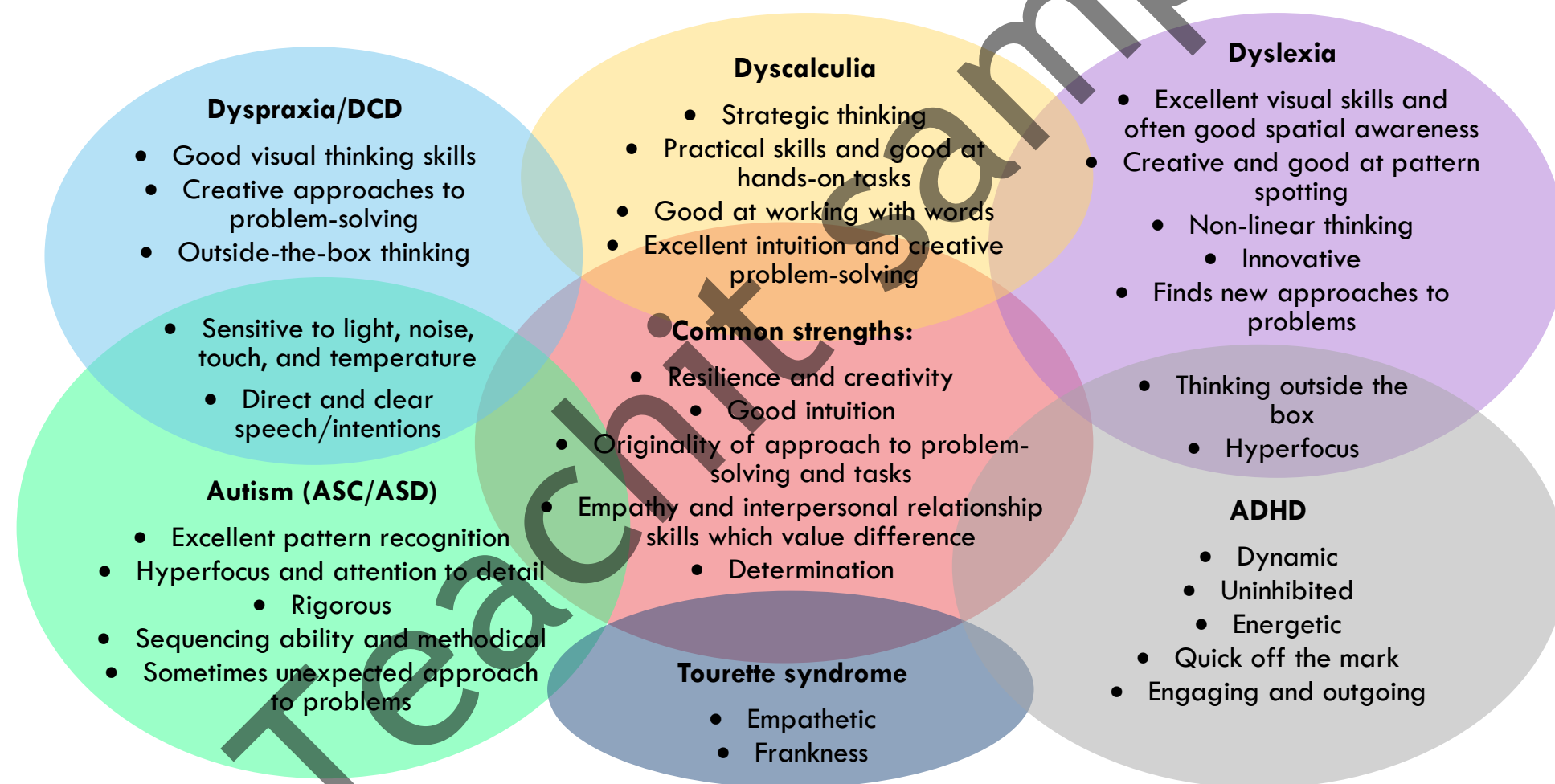
Printable resources

The deficit make-up of neurodiversity



Whilst there are challenges associated with neurodiversities, there are also many strengths linked to the different ways in which neurodiverse individuals process and engage with information about the world around them. Those strengths are shown here in a re-envisioned, updated version of the diagram:

Neurodiversity: strengths and gifts



Classroom strategies

Knowledge building

This section of the guide contains information for teachers to both increase their understanding of what dyslexia is and develop strategies for how to support dyslexic children to understand their own profiles as learners. There are hints and tips, professional development activities, and suggestions for classroom activities and tweaks to practice so that learning is dyslexia friendly. Resources are printable, and the key thing is not to be shy to make them your own. There is also a PowerPoint presentation to accompany these suggestions.

There are many ways that we can support children with dyslexia and help to bridge the gaps in their knowledge.

1

Know your children.

Teachers and Teaching Assistants in primary schools are often adept at making close bonds with their children and learning about what makes each child unique. Children with special educational needs such as dyslexia need this even more than their peers. Primary schools set the tone for a child's education and how they feel about themselves as a learner. Starting school can be bewildering for a child with dyslexia; suddenly they are in an environment where they struggle to understand one of the main means of communicating learning (the written word), and also struggle to acquire skills that many of their peers seem to do so with relative ease. This can lead to a change in their identity, self-esteem and sense of belonging. It can also lead to children converging up their difficulties through copying other pupils, messing around to avoid exposure or employing other distracting techniques. This can be counteracted by lots of positive and personal connection with key adults. Welcoming environments in which the child is met in the morning with a smile and a personal greeting, conversations about things the child is good at and personal responsibilities linked to their strengths can all help to give a child confidence, a sense of belonging and a positive learner identity. This can make all the difference to their success and happiness at school, both immediately and in their future. Of course, primary school teachers do this as a matter of course, but for children with dyslexic tendencies the personal connection and child-specific knowledge needs to be amplified. It also means that staff can use the pupil's strengths and interests to help them engage with difficult tasks, and to punctuate the day with things that the child finds easier. Furthermore, praise can be given for amazing effort, even when the outcomes are not as obvious as they are for peers who more easily acquire literacy skills.

2

Know their profiles.

As with other suggestions, this may seem obvious, but the underlying reasons for children's different needs can make substantial differences to how you support them. Where children find elements of literacy challenging, the ways they want to be supported or the things that work are different. Taking the time to familiarise yourself with what has gone before and what works well for them can make your interactions with them much easier and really support them to be their best selves. It is important to continue support between classes as children progress through the school as children often lack the confidence and awareness to request support. This sometimes leads to adults assuming a child no longer requires a particular personalised strategy, and the child feeling alone and anxious about a strategy that had really helped them ending. Taking time to involve a child in these discussions can be very empowering and help prepare them for their next steps in education.

3

Praise and highlight their successes.

Dyslexic children can sometimes feel that their work is secondary to the marking from their teachers. It can be pretty soul-destroying to have your work obliterated with teacher marking or requests to correctly copy spelling of words out a number of times; a child can feel as if they never get things right. Focus on the positives. Give children the positive input and support that they need to see that they can do 'it', whatever 'it' is in that moment. Tell them when they have done well, and be specific in your praise. That way, your children can see what they have done well and do it again. It is also helpful to put every child's work on the wall celebrating its wonderful content, even if it is laced with spelling mistakes. Children notice, but often don't say, when their work is never the one that is shared, celebrated and displayed. Sometimes children with dyslexia are good at 'keeping their head down' to avoid their difficulties being noticed. This means that they go through school not receiving awards, being noticed or causing anyone any issues. The long term effect of this can be low self-esteem and underachievement. It is essential that we make time to praise and celebrate pupils.

4

Minimise copying.

Copying from a board or screen can seem like an easy way for children to record all the relevant information from a lesson, but this is not the case. Copying from a board or screen is a labour-intensive process for children with dyslexia; children may only remember one word at a time,

and then struggle to find the right place in the text when they look back up the board. Sometimes a child will look like a nodding pigeon, as they have to look up so many times! It is exhausting and they will not be remembering any of the content for future use. Where you can, print out resources for your children so that they don't have to copy – that way, they can focus on content, not copying. Ideally, do this for all your children so that you don't draw attention to those who really are the focus of handouts. If children aren't having to concentrate on copying down notes and concepts, they can focus on what you really want them to learn, which benefits all the children in the class.

5

Keep marking minimal.

That is not to say don't mark your children's books. On the contrary, do mark them, but don't mark everything. Concentrate your marking on certain spelling patterns or grammar rules. Don't comment on every wobble your child has; help them to hone one or two key concepts and then move on to supporting them in developing other skills. Focused, minimal marking will help them do this as they won't feel bombarded with comments about their mistakes. It is also a chance to give lots of praise, though sometimes this is best done with smiley faces and symbols, because more reading is another stressor in a stressful day!

6

Don't always assess with writing.

Can children show their knowledge by talking about something? Do they need to write about their last bit of learning, or can they do a presentation or make a comic strip? Can they make a video or an animation? Can they record answers into a talk button? Can they talk through their understanding of a topic with you or another adult in the room so that you have really had the opportunity to delve into their understanding in a way that doesn't put their challenges centre stage? Focusing on your children's strengths so that they can then showcase their understanding and ideas is good for everyone – their confidence will soar, and their outcomes will improve.

7

Don't put children on the spot.

Where children have vulnerabilities in their verbal processing, or are reticent to share ideas in class, putting them on the spot and trying to extract answers or responses from them under duress can be really upsetting and unhelpful. It is likely to make them less able to share their ideas and answer the question posed or read the passage that you are

working on. And don't expect children to read unfamiliar passages out loud – that is really hard for dyslexic learners.

Instead, give them warning. Let them volunteer to answer rather than expecting a response there and then. Let children know that there is a question coming or that there is something they may need to articulate in class so that they have time to process the task, build up their response and then feel secure in what they are going to say, wherever possible.

Teachit sample

Checklist: What do you need help with?

This is a checklist to help children to articulate what they find tricky and how you can support them to find ways to work around their challenges. They can go through this independently but most primary aged children will benefit from the the support of an adult. Even our youngest key stage one children can explain and understand a lot about their learning preferences when given the right support and the space. The earlier we have these conversations with our children, the more we empower them to identify as learners with autonomy and self-efficacy. This checklist is designed to be a quick way to gain insight into vulnerabilities, areas of strength and learning preferences. It is helpful for all children, not just those with a learning difference. With younger children the adult can phrase it in a way that makes sense to the child and use real examples from the activities that have taken place on that particular day. It may also be helpful to do just 5 or 6 from the list at a time so that the child is able to concentrate.

Things I find tricky

Task or skill	Tricky? ☹️	Sometimes okay	Easy? 😊
Remembering what the teacher has asked you to do			
Understanding what people are talking about and want you to do in class			
Reading out loud			
Reading in your head (<i>this often doesn't emerge until later KS1</i>)			
Understanding the words that you have read			
KS1: Understanding what a question is asking you KS2: Understanding the wording of questions			
Remembering the right word when you are talking to people – do you sometimes forget words?			
Spelling words the right way			

KS1: Knowing what to do first when you are working in class			
KS2: Planning your work, especially when you are writing longer things like stories and reports			
Remembering your times tables			
Answering questions when we are talking as a whole class			
Copying from the board			
Learning the special words for our topics			
Handwriting – writing quickly enough			
Handwriting – writing so that people can read it			
Doing maths sums like adding up and taking away			
Concentrating when you are reading or writing			
Getting all your ideas on paper in the time you have in a lesson			
Writing letters like 'b' and 'd' and 'p' or numbers like 2, 3, 5 and 7 the correct way round			