



Exceptional Teacher's Factsheet

Faculty of Education

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Strategies for Classroom Teachers Of Students with Nonverbal Learning Disabilities

Imagine that you are a student who has good verbal skills. You can read well and write very competently for your age. However, when you look at a map or a diagram, you can't make any sense out of it. Even when you look at people and see their facial expressions or gestures, you can never tell what they are trying to communicate. The left hemisphere of your brain, which handles verbal information, is working wonderfully. The right side of your brain though, the part that handles visual and perceptual information, is not working well for you. Because you have such a hard time reading what peoples' expressions and actions are communicating, your classmates isolate you and shun you, and the teachers keep asking if you have emotional problems. This is what it might feel like to have a non-verbal learning disability.

Often, non-verbal learning disabilities are caused by some kind of injury to the right side of the brain through disease, head injury, radiation treatments, or surgery. A student may also have genetic factors that have affected brain development. About one in every 100 to 1000 people are affected by this condition.

Symptoms/Indicators

- Anxiety – particularly social anxiety
- Attention – may appear to have attentional problems
- Attention – may focus on details and miss the big picture
- Awkwardness
- Balance – problems with balance may have frequent falls
- Depression – may occur
- Easily manipulated by others
- Hearing – can not interpret tone of voice
- IQ Scores – verbal IQ is higher than performance IQ score by 10-15 points or more
- Language – interprets literally, has difficulty with sarcasm or figures of speech
- Math skills – weak in computation and abstract applications
- Memory – strong rote memory skills

- Motor skills – gross motor skills weak and uncoordinated
- Motor skills – fine motor skills uncoordinated
- Organization – poor organization of materials and work area
- Personal space – unaware of others' personal space
- Reading – strong reading skills
- Spatial Skills – difficulty with drawing, maps and pictures
- Speech – monopolizing a conversation, talking continuously
- Social Skills – poor social skills
- Visual/spatial – problems with perception
- Writing – strong verbal skills
- Writing – may have problems with cursive writing

Accommodations/Interventions

- Meet with the parent(s). If you notice any of these patterns of indicators, notify the family to see if an assessment is indicated.
- Notify your student support team about the situation.
- Notify the parents of any changes with the student.
- Do not let the child's strong verbal skills fool you into thinking he/she doesn't require assistance and accommodations.
- What you might be inclined to interpret as misbehaviour is really disability. Avoid the usual kinds of consequences and punishments and treat incidents as opportunities to teach.
- Almost all of our social learning occurs through observation and imitation. For most of us, if someone is acting socially inappropriate, we are reluctant to say anything, fearing that it will be insulting to say what is so clearly obvious to us. We will tend to use nonverbal cues to lead the person to more appropriate ways of acting. This is a mindset that we must leave behind when dealing with NVLD students. These students are socially inappropriate precisely *because* they can't read the non-verbal cues. Giving them more non-verbal cues would be like speaking in Greek to them. What we need to do is set aside our normal way of reacting, deal with these situations as direct instruction opportunities, and remember that the method of direct instruction has to be verbal. That is the modality through which these children can acquire new information. We have to say directly to the child, "The space within my arms reach is my personal space. People don't like it when others go inside that space. When you are talking with someone, you should have your body at least an arm's length away. Let's practice this now."
- Avoid using figures of speech, slang, or sarcasm. If you use figurative language, be sure to interpret it literally for the student immediately afterwards.
- Large writing instruments, or large rubber grips on pens and pencils may help with weak graphomotor skills.

- Minimize paper and pencil tasks. Substitute computer use wherever possible.
- Lateness may be an issue. Avoid a punitive approach and provide verbal instructions and cues to help prevent future problems.
- Provide extra time for any written tasks.
- Avoid timed tests.
- Spatial tasks will be daunting for this student. Provide direct verbal instruction and plenty of assistance.
- Remove distractions from the student's immediate area to reduce overstimulation.
- Whereas you will want to teach most students in a multisensory way, this student will be overwhelmed by such an approach. Simple verbal instruction will work best for this student.
- Routine and structure will be helpful. Provide adequate warning of transitions and new activities.
- A written timetable for the day may be very helpful.
- Lists may help the student in developing better organizational skills.
- A duplicate set of textbooks at home will be an asset.
- Give verbal instructions prior to any new activity.
- A written list of instructions may be helpful for new activities.
- Whereas in many cases, asking a student to repeat instructions back to you is an effective strategy, it will not work for this student, who will be able to repeat all of your instructions verbatim while not understanding any of them.
- Connect any new learning to prior knowledge.
- Instruction will work best starting from component parts and building the big picture, rather than the other way around.
- Allow for non-written responses on assignments – oral responses or responses on tape may help avoid the frustration of difficulties with writing.
- Paper with raised lines may help with writing tasks. Graph paper may help with math tasks to keep columns aligned.
- Do not penalize the student for placing right answers in the wrong place on a page.
- Co-operative learning may be a positive experience as long as the student is not assigned to be the recorder for the group.
- Use direct instruction to teach cause and effect relationships.
- Use direct instruction to teach how to read body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice.
- Use direct instruction to teach conversational skills.
- A peer helper or buddy can be helpful for this student.
- If you are being smothered with questions or discussion, defer them to a quiet time later in the day, or place a limit on the number of questions the student may ask at one time.
- Allow for a depressurizing time and place if the student who is feeling overwhelmed.

- Art and physical education activities will likely need modification.

Recommended Resources

LDOnline.Org.
www.ldonline.org

NLDline,Com.
www.nldline.com

NLD on the Web.
www.nldontheweb.org

Nonverbal Learning Disorders Association.
www.nlda.org

This factsheet for educators has been prepared in the Faculty of Education at Brandon University with the contributions of students in our Bachelor of Education program and working teachers in the field. We hope you find this helpful in your professional practice. To make this a living and growing resource, we encourage you to send suggestions, comments, and ideas on strategies you have found effective, or resources you have found helpful to Dr. Cam Symons at symonsc@brandonu.ca.

Disclaimer

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