

SUCCEEDING AT SCHOOL: ACCOMMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH COORDINATION DIFFICULTIES



Children who have coordination difficulties struggle with many routine tasks that other children do with ease during a typical school day. Printing, cutting with scissors, opening lunch containers, organizing work on a page, tying shoes, buttoning jeans, playing games at recess can all be sources of frustration for a child with coordination difficulties. Older students who have mastered some of these basic skills may still have difficulties with organization of time/materials, quality/speed of written output, participation in physical education classes and in sports. These children may have Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) (See <http://www.canchild.ca/Default.aspx?tabid=468> for more information on DCD).

Do all students with DCD require accommodations?

DCD is a medical diagnosis, not an educational diagnosis; as such, it does not easily lead to programming to meet children's learning needs at school. Many children with DCD do not qualify for, nor do they need, special education services. Some children with DCD do need simple accommodations, however, that can make a big difference to their ability to participate and be successful at school.

Before beginning to think about accommodations, it is important to ensure that the child does not have other learning issues such as a language or nonverbal learning disability, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder or a specific language impairment. Children with DCD are at higher risk for these disorders and a careful assessment is important to rule out whether or not other conditions are present.

If the child's primary problem is motor coordination, there are many strategies that can be helpful. Children can continue to meet curriculum requirements at their grade level, but they may need *accommodations* to help them complete their work and demonstrate their learning progress. Sometimes educators try to decrease workloads and end up decreasing academic expectations instead. Children with DCD do not typically need a modified program that changes the curriculum expectations – accommodations are usually sufficient.

How can a plan be developed?

A plan to meet the child's needs can be negotiated informally with the teacher or can be formalized through the development of an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The structure and process of IEPs varies by province and school board, but they share common features. An IEP is a written document that describes the student's strengths and needs and sets out a plan to address those needs. IEPs are typically developed in collaboration with parents, teachers, special educators, principals, health professionals and (depending on the grade level) the student. IEPs are meant to be working documents that are regularly monitored and revised as the student progresses. The accommodations included in an IEP are typically grouped into three categories: instructional, assessment and environmental accommodations.

What are common accommodations for students with motor coordination difficulties?

While all plans should be individualized and based on a child's specific learning profile, there are a quite a few accommodations that we have found to be helpful for many children who have motor coordination difficulties. Some sample ideas are listed below.

Seating/Positioning

- Preferential seating near the teacher
- Provide an angled desk or writing surface
- Adjust chair and/or desk height to maximize posture and stability
- Place a "Wiggle" cushion on the chair
- Place a non-skid mat on the chair
- Give the child permission to kneel on a chair or stand when working at a table
- Provide opportunities to get up for movement breaks
- Assign the end locker or cubby
- Label locker shelves
- Have a seat or bench available for dressing at recess, dismissal and physical education

Tools/Materials

- Try different types of paper (e.g., paper with highlighted margins or lines, colour coded paper for letter sizing, graph paper for lining up numbers and letters)
- Have the child write on alternate lines
- Try a variety of writing tools (e.g., ergonomically designed pens/pencils, gel pens, soft lead pencils, weighted pencils and pens)
- Use pencil grips

- Use spring loaded or loop scissors
- Use a single binder with dividers and inside pockets to hold papers
- Use a pencil case with three holes to include in binder to hold basic tools
- Provide an extra set of textbooks for the child to keep at home

Technology

- Use a computer or word processor for written assignments
- Use spell check
- Provide computer software for word prediction, read back, speech recognition, and graphic organization
- Use clip art for title pages
- Use a Dictaphone rather than printing or typing

Time

- Provide extra time to complete tests or writing assignments
- Allow the child an early start to get ready for recess
- Review the pacing and/or timing of work to decrease fatigue
- Provide extra time to get changed for gym or avoid changing altogether by allowing appropriate clothing to be worn for the day

Expectations

- Negotiate the level of neatness required in notebooks
- Use date stamp rather than having the child writing the date each time
- Reduce total number of questions, while selecting from range of difficulty throughout a worksheet (e.g., even numbered only)
- Accept parent scribing for homework
- Allow oral test-taking
- Accept point-form answers
- Use fill-in-the-blanks, or matching, where possible
- On spelling tests, print just the spelling word (do not require a whole sentence)
- Accept alternate assessment methods (e.g., displays, speeches)

Assistance

- Monitor use of agenda and homework completion
- Email homework assignments to the child
- Assign a writing buddy/peer secretary to record notes using carbon paper
- Photocopy notes for the child
- Provide step-by-step instruction for new skills in gym

- Use visual demonstration, verbal directions, and specific feedback
- Provide parent/student with unit goals ahead of time to allow for preteaching and practice of new skills

Where can I find additional resources?

Many of these ideas will apply across the age spectrum. More specific suggestions, organized by grade level, can be found in the MATCH flyers for educators:

<http://www.canchild.ca/Default.aspx?tabid=497>. Teachers may also find the article, *They're bright but can't write* helpful: <http://www.canchild.ca/Default.aspx?tabid=253>.

A general resource book around the development of IEPs and school issues for children with special needs in Canada is:

Forman, N. (2005). *Exceptional children – Ordinary schools*. Markham, ON: Fitzhenry and Whiteside.

**For more information about children with DCD, visit the
CanChild Centre for Childhood Disability Research website:**

www.canchild.ca

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