



T U T O R S ' T I P S

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Meeting the Literacy and Numeracy Needs of Students with Intellectual Disabilities

What are the learning needs of students with intellectual disabilities?

The opportunity to grow and develop is a basic human right for everyone, including people with disabilities. Continuing development depends greatly on the opportunities and experiences which a person can access, and the expectations of those around them. Providing appropriate conditions to facilitate learning has a positive effect on the skill development of people with disabilities.

Degrees of intellectual disability can range from mild to severe. The level of intellectual disability in the group of students attending literacy or numeracy classes is usually mild to moderate. Students with mild intellectual disabilities are generally capable of leading independent lives, with minimal support. Often moderately disabled students have greater needs and will be accompanied to class by a support worker, who has knowledge of the day to day requirements of the student and the best way to encourage communication. Those students with severe intellectual disabilities usually have special needs that cannot be catered for successfully within literacy and numeracy classes.

People with intellectual disabilities have even more varied capabilities than do the normal population. Therefore they have far more specialised needs. Whenever possible, teaching in a one to one or small group situation is most beneficial, especially when teaching something new.

If intellectually disabled adults have been to special schools, the focus may have been on acquiring communication and living skills, rather than learning to read and write. Some students have minimal skills in these areas, while others may have quite good literacy and/or numeracy ability. Whether the skills are existing or newly learned, maintenance through ongoing use and practice is necessary.

For most intellectually disabled adults, the skills of listening, speaking and understanding are as important as the skills of reading and writing. Adults with intellectual disabilities often have more articulation problems and harder to understand speech than their non-impaired peers. Learning to socialise with others in a variety of settings is considered important.

General strategies for tutoring students with intellectual disabilities

Tutors who are calm, kind, patient, imaginative and have a sense of fun will find working in this field to be very rewarding. Be prepared for slow progress and celebrate the smallest of achievements, which may in fact be a gigantic step for the student.

- Listen to the student.
- Start with something in which the student has shown interest.
- Work with the skills and strategies the student already has.
- Use concrete materials where possible.
- Proceed in small sequential steps.
- Review frequently.
- Provide prompt and constant feedback.
- Stress success.



- Provide opportunities to practise in normal environments rather than contrived ones.
- Allow more time.
- Be creative in presenting the same material in a variety of different ways.
- Build varying degrees of difficulty into the learning program.
- Include tasks to develop personal skills, time management, community access, basic numeracy.
- Link activities to oracy as well as to the written word.
- Provide suitable reading materials that contain high frequency words.
- Use taped books and texts with pictorial support.
- Use simple instructions.
- Provide variety in learning contexts - eg pair work, individual work, group work.
- Be prepared to change direction if required.
- Have a range of back up ideas and resources.
- Appraise learning in a variety of ways over a long period of time.

Developing communication

Many adults with intellectual impairments may not have been able to benefit from the full range of social interaction to which most of us are exposed - such as taking part in groups, clubs or classes, meeting people socially or at work, expressing views, sharing experiences and knowledge. Incorporating communication skills into literacy programs is therefore very important.

Common communication problems

- Not being able to use speech effectively.
- Not being able to understand what is said.
- Mixture of oral and signed communication methods.
- Difficulty with abstract concepts.
- Mild hearing loss.
- Misarticulated sounds.
- Difficulty controlling the tone, rate and rhythm of speech.
- Little practice in communication.
- Limited vocabulary.
- Disordered sentences.
- Uncertainty about how to meet, greet and converse with people.



Suggestions for improving communication skills

Strategies for Tutors

- Tutors should speak directly to students with intellectual disabilities, as they would to any other student.
- Use a friendly and cheerful tone.
- Use age appropriate language.
- Try to keep instructions and explanations as short as possible, as language itself can form a distraction to learning.
- Keep what you say related to the topic.
- Use statements to describe what is going on rather than questions.
- Explanations can be accompanied by gestures, demonstrations and models to make the meaning clear.
- Do not demand or even expect an immediate spoken response.
- Give feedback when the student gets something wrong, but focus on positive reinforcement.
- Avoid negative or disapproving ways of saying things.
- Give reinforcement immediately and often.
- Fade your assistance gradually once skills are gained, to avoid dependence.

Skills for students

- Establish eye contact when talking and listening.
- Speak at an appropriate volume and pace.
- Learn how to get someone's attention and use appropriate greetings.
- Initiate a conversation.
- Choose a topic and stay on topic.
- Respond with thanks to compliments, praise or gifts.
- Take turns in conversation.
- Keep an appropriate distance when speaking.
- Expand vocabulary.
- Speak in sentences rather than words or phrases.





How to have a conversation with someone who doesn't talk very much.

- Start the conversation with a greeting, then wait for a response.
- Make a descriptive comment about something the person has, is doing or has done.
 - ~ "That's a pretty top."
 - ~ "You did well at reading today."
 - ~ "You enjoyed the party last week."
- Questions can be conversation killers. Avoid them.
- Expand any remark the student makes, by adding more information and restating it as a complete sentence.
- When the client doesn't respond to a descriptive comment, or just repeats the last word, move on to another descriptive sentence.
- Use expansion to turn the client's one word sentence into a longer utterance by filling in the blanks.

Developing writing

Developing writing is a tremendous aid to communication. The value lies not only in the writing itself, but in the process of creating it. It encourages the student to think clearly, to learn to express ideas in sequence, to talk in sentences rather than fragmented phrases and to talk about opinions and experiences. Writing can be done as a group - writing sentences on the whiteboard, reading them over and revising them. Every one should be encouraged to contribute their own ideas.

Many adults with intellectual disabilities may not handle the skills of spelling or punctuation. Some may find it difficult to copy out their own work. This is not important. With the tutor acting as the scribe and encouraging the students to concentrate on what is of most value, they should be able to express what they want to say.

Start off by talking. You will need to establish what the student wants to write about. As you talk, the tutor jots down the student's ideas, even if they are only odd words and phrases rather than complete sentences. After a time the tutor reads his jottings back to the student who decides what to say. He dictates his ideas to the tutor, who encourages and prompts with open -ended questions. The piece may be rewritten and reread many times before the student is satisfied.

Example

The student had visited a gym and had tried weight lifting. Pete came to class complaining that his stomach muscles were sore and decided to write about it. Pete tends to talk in broken phrases and you sometimes have to guess at his meaning.

"My guts hurt."

"From the weight lifting?"

"Yeah."

"Do the muscles hurt?"

"Do they! Did it a couple of times. He was good."

"Who?"

"The bloke."

"Which bloke?"

"The teacher - what ever you call him. Fit."

"He was very fit, was he?"

"Yeah, fit. Didn't hurt him."



After the first draft, make changes as required and then make a fair copy for typing. Discuss a title. Many students can learn how to copy their work using a computer. Then the student's stories can be published in a booklet, thus creating an ideal text for the student to read.

This is the finished piece after Pete had revised it.

We went to the gym for a sports evening. I went a couple of times to the weight lifting. My muscles hurt the next day. The instructor was very fit. He finds it easy.

Ideas for literacy activities

Listening

- Listen to a story or a magazine or newspaper article read aloud, then answer questions or give opinions on it.
- Close eyes and listen to sounds in room and outside. One person identifies a sound.
- Listen to tapes and describe the actions or moods of the people talking.
- Listen to music and describe how it makes you feel.
- Talk about pleasant and unpleasant sounds.
- Use a telephone to role play giving and taking messages, giving sad or happy news, making appointments, asking for information.

Speaking

- Have a news session where all students are encouraged to share information.
- Discuss topics eg. Favourite foods, saddest / happiest moment, jobs, TV programs, what I would do with \$1000.
- Tell a joke.
- Describe a film seen recently.
- Memory games - identify objects on a tray.
- Tell a story - one sentence per person.
- Use drama - act out real life situations.

Reading

- Read personal details.
- Read text in language experience booklets.
- Locate library books.
- Find simple information eg recipes.
- Make signs and look around to find others like them.
- Prepare a checklist for signs that students have to find.
- Make a map of the building and put signs in appropriate places.
- Take students for a walk and look at signs on doors, sign posts, names of streets, shops.
- Make a quiz and have students look for signs to do with money, transport, time, shopping.
- Match pairs of words using games eg, snap, bingo.
- Use social sight words on displays in the classroom.
- Look for place names on maps, tickets, in the local paper, magazines.
- Find own name and address in telephone book, class register, wage packet.
- Make wall charts with birthdays.
- Find favourite shows in TV guide.
- Read short, simple stories.

Writing

- Tracing and copying.
- Writing name and address.
- Remember and write birthdays and special events.
- Complete simple forms and worksheets.
- Writing simple diary entries.
- Signing and sending letters eg thank you.
- Signing birthday, Christmas and get well cards.
- Use a variety of writing tools (felt tips, chalk, wax, crayon, pencils) and see which student prefer.
- Label possessions.
- Use collage of letters cut out from newspapers, Scrabble letters, magnetic letters.
- Fill out a variety of forms.
- Design ID bracelets for class.
- Produce business cards with name, address and phone number.
- Assemble word on cards to make sentences.
- Label photo albums
- Dictate stories to scribe to create texts for language experience booklets.
- Some topics for writing may be: daily routines, likes and dislikes, friends, family, shopping, pets/animals, hobbies, food/cooking/sport, TV/movies, excursions/holidays.

Ideas for numeracy activities

- 1:1 correspondence when counting.
- counting forward and backwards - to 10,20,etc.
- count from first to tenth.
- make numbers with concrete materials.
- recognise numerals to 10, 20 etc.
- sequence numbers.
- write numerals and words for numbers.
- understand basic operations.
- understand purpose of money.
- recognise coins and notes.
- use coins to represent money amounts.
- compare money value.
- estimate money and change.
- apply money skills to shopping.
- read and make informal maps.
- recognise and name simple shapes.
- match shapes.
- repeat and create patterns.
- be aware of instruments used to measure time, length, weight and capacity.
- use instruments to do simple measurements eg. cooking, cutting, making an object.
- read calendars.
- understand timetables.
- tell the time (digital and analogue).
- interpret simple graphs.
- collect data.
- represent data visually.
- use concrete materials for activities for as long as the student needs them.

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