Instructional Accommodations for ADHD and LD Students

Grant Martin, PhD, is a psychologist in private practice in Edmonds, Washington. He specializes in the identification and treatment of students with special needs, such as ADHD and LD students, and he has taught a number of enabler seminars for ACSI on this topic. He is the author of numerous books, including The Attention Deficit Child and Help! My Child Isn't Learning.

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Suicide attempts, drug use, depression, defiance, acts of violence—these can be cries for help. Many students in our Christian schools are crying out for assistance. They feel pain and anguish brought about by failure in the classroom, and this failure can occur because the instruction they are receiving does not match their unique requirements for learning.

In spite of the commitment of Christian schools to help all students reach their potential, many special needs students, such as those with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and learning disabilities (LDs), do not learn well in the typical Christian school environment. The Christian school experience can play a major role in student development and learning, and our schools exist to facilitate each child's God-given endowment.

As Christian educators with a calling to help students learn in the best way possible, what can we do? Let me give an analogy. Every person's body needs a balanced diet. For many of us, a normal menu provides the nutrition we need to stay reasonably healthy and carry out our daily functions. However, some people need adjustments in their diet, such as extra iron or vitamin B. They need more of certain nutrients to meet the unique needs of their body. The same concept applies to special needs students. Many of the teaching methods that work for regular students will also work with most special needs students. It's just that these students need more consistent doses of the basic elements of quality teaching. Sometimes these students need a specialized diet containing customized instruction. However, quality instruction provided in a consistent manner will go a long way in helping all students reach their potential.

A mission of educators is to understand how within-school variables can be altered to accommodate the requirements of these students. Our job is to help students in learning more effectively and in handling their situation in a responsible manner. The purpose of this article is to highlight accommodations, that is, plans and procedures, that facilitate classroom success for special needs students.

A complete program for special needs students such as those with ADHD and LDs will include strategies for accommodations and remediation. These students may be receiving help from a resource-room/learning center teacher or an outside tutor to remediate some basic deficits. However, it often takes one to three years to bring deficit areas up to a normal functional level. In the meantime, we want these children to succeed as much as possible in the regular classroom. This process may require some modifications in how we give instruction and how students carry out assignments.

Accommodation

Accommodation is the adjustment of materials such as textbooks and worksheets, as well as of assignments and classroom routines. The intent is to help special needs students work around their specific disability in order to achieve success. Accommodations modify the environment or provide assistance to allow students to meet the class requirements without adjustments to the standards of the class. We want students to participate in as many classroom functions as possible and to benefit from them.

Accommodations come in three basic forms. The first type involves the manner in which teachers assess and grade students. The following guidelines show ways that testing can undergo adjustment to accommodate students' learning challenges:
• Do not give handwritten tests, and make sure all duplicated materials contain clear, large, dark, easy-to-read text.
• Whenever possible, place the instructions next to the questions to which they relate, and make sure test questions stand out visually from the test answers on tests such as multiple choice and matching.
• Assure that the test questions fall in a logical, sequential order. Test questions should be arranged so that they progress logically through the material being tested.
• Give frequent short quizzes and avoid long tests.
• Allow students extra time when needed to complete skill assessments such as quizzes, exams, and tests—including standardized tests—to help eliminate possible test anxiety.
• Provide students with various opportunities, methods, or test formats to demonstrate what they know.
• Allow students to take tests or quizzes in a quiet place so that they have as few distractions as possible.
• Give exams orally.
• Use a greater number of objective items and require fewer essay responses.
• Allow students to give test answers on a tape recorder.

The second type of accommodation involves modifying the curriculum. Educators can do this in two basic ways. They can significantly modify it so that students with special needs are not expected to learn as much of the same material in the same amount of time, or they can alter the content to fit the students' specific strengths and weaknesses. The following suggestions contain examples of content accommodations:
• Require that students learn fewer vocabulary terms per week than their normally achieving peers.
• Provide easy-to-read texts adapted for those with reading difficulty.
• Provide modified content-area classes so that the content is briefer and simpler.
• Allow directions, stories, and lessons to be recorded on tapes or CDs so that students can listen again in order to clarify their understanding of directions or concepts.
• Give extra time to complete tasks.
• Simplify complex written directions, and highlight significant parts of directions.
• Hand out worksheets or assignments one at a time to help prevent students from being overwhelmed.
• Provide a glossary of terms for content areas.
• Require fewer correct responses to achieve grades, focusing on quality instead of quantity.
• Provide in written form a structured routine, describing daily activities.
• Shorten assignments, breaking work into smaller segments.
• Encourage the use of books on tape to support students’ reading assignments.
• Provide published book summaries, synopses, or digests of major reading assignments for students to review before you teach the related lessons.

Third, accommodations often take place with regard to the nature of the assigned tasks. Alternative tasks can reduce the information-processing demands on students, allow them to circumvent their weaknesses in learning, or both. The following guidelines fall in this category of modifying tasks:
• Provide outlines depicting the main ideas and pertinent points in a text chapter.
• Assign group projects instead of individual ones so that other students in the group can complete those tasks in the project that require skills the students with disabilities lack.
• Permit students at the beginning of each week to check in with an advisor to plan/organize the week and at the end of each week to review the week and to plan/organize homework for the weekend.
• Allow computer-printed assignments prepared by students or, if needed, dictated by students and recorded by someone else.
• Do not require lengthy outside reading assignments.
• Develop a reading guide that contains periodic questions to help students focus on relevant content.


**Effective Teaching Practices for Special Needs Students**

In order to be an effective teacher of LD or ADHD students, you must remember that these young people are not necessarily less capable than your successful students. Successful students enjoy a good match between the way their brain works and the requirements of the normal classroom. Their brains can handle the skills required to be successful in an environment where typical instruction takes place.

Often, however, less successful students do not learn well with the standard teaching methods. While they may be called “learning disabled,” it might be more accurate to say that they are “learning strategy disabled.” Most of these students have not consistently been taught learning strategies that are compatible with the way they think and learn. Once we teach them in ways that match their unique needs, their learning problems will decrease greatly.

When you implement the right instructional methods, often you don’t have to water down the curriculum for these students. When you find the right matches, these students can succeed. When that happens, we are achieving the mandate to help all students reach their full potential.

Research has identified some of the core elements of effective teaching practices and the key features of effective materials, both of which we can use with special needs students. Studies have found that the following teaching guidelines have the best impact on special needs students:

- Begin each lesson with a short review of previous learning.
- Begin each lesson with a short statement of goals.
- Present new material in small steps and provide time for students to practice after each step.
- Give clear explanations and detailed instructions.
- Provide a high level of active practice for all students.
- Ask a large number of questions, check for student understanding, and obtain responses from all students.
- Guide students during the initial practice.
- Provide systematic feedback and corrections.
- Provide explicit instructions and practice for seatwork and exercises, and, when necessary, monitor students during seatwork.

Effective teachers of LD students also give explicit instructions, give praise, use good management, provide individual attention, create a healthy emotional climate, provide opportunities for responding time, and use active learning strategies.

**Explicit Instruction for Special Needs Students**

ADHD and LD students also benefit from explicit, or direct, instruction. When teachers use explicit instruction, they clearly state what they are going to teach and what students need to do. The following suggestions provide a summary of the principles of explicit instruction:

- Provide students with an adequate range of examples that help them understand a concept or problem-solving strategy.
- Provide models of proficient performance, including either step-by-step strategies or broad generic questions and guidelines that focus attention and that prompt deep processing.
- Provide experiences in which students explain how and why they make decisions.
- Provide both frequent feedback on quality of performance and constant support so that students persist in performing activities.
- Provide both adequate practice and activities that are interesting and engaging.

We could explore other effective teaching practices. However, these lists will benefit you significantly as you apply them in your work with ADHD and LD students.

This article is adapted from Grant Martin’s forthcoming book called Help! for Teachers: Strategies for Reaching All Students, to be published by Purposeful Design Publications. The book will address these accommodations and will explain remediation strategies.