

Fact Sheet 38

Managing learning and behavioural issues at school

Children with epilepsy (CWE) have a wide range of learning abilities but many will experience problems with cognition, memory, learning processes, concentration or behaviour. It is suggested that at least 25% of CWE will function in the learning-disabled range as a result of the underlying cause of epilepsy and their seizures and/or medications. Consequently, many CWE, especially boys, are at risk generally of underachievement and make less progress than would be expected for their age and intelligence level. CWE have very high rates of behavioural and learning difficulties which often go unrecognised.

Many behavioural difficulties for CWE include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), depression and anxiety.

About 50% of CWE are likely to have motor problems such as cerebral palsy and about 5-10% of people with Down syndrome will have seizures. Many CWE will also have an epilepsy syndrome. CWE require successful learning environments created by those teachers who promote independence, self esteem and peer acceptance. Ideally, the teachers would develop a partnership with the parents, develop realistic expectations of the CWE, establish routines, understand seizure management and be aware of the many learning, social and/or behavioural challenges as a result of seizures and/or medications. CWE would need to be assessed on diagnosis for their strengths and weaknesses by an educational psychologist or, preferably, a neuropsychologist, and an appropriate Ministry of Education funding package should be allocated to them.

CWE are likely to feel socially isolated and so care and support of them would need to be considered.

Studies of CWE in the UK suggest that epilepsy should be recognised as a specific educational need and hence more resources and knowledge should be given. There is a tendency to see epilepsy just as an episodic medical condition but the impacts of having it are educationally profound in many cases.

Practical suggestions for teachers around learning and behavioural difficulties for CWE

1. Difficulties with cognition: “the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses”. CWE need educational intervention.

- More curriculum support to be given if a child is behind his/her peers
- Learning tasks should be set at the appropriate level so that a CWE can achieve success
- Simplify tasks
- Give a short set of instructions that are clearly understood by the CWE
- Be prepared to re-instruct during a lesson
- Allow for extra time to complete work
- School-based assessments should be geared towards the individual progress rather than how they are ranked according to their age in a classroom

2. Difficulties with memory are very common. CWE have problems storing, retrieving and encoding information. They will have difficulties following instructions.

- Eliminate distractions so that the CWE can focus on the task in hand
- Reduce the rate in which new information is presented
- Focus on one type of information at a time
- Handouts of material may be needed
- Use specific memory strategies such as mnemonics to aid retention
- Teach basic study skills such as highlighting, paraphrasing, outlining and summarising
- Use visual aids such diagrams, graphs or pictures to illustrate information
- Encourage the use of organisational aids such as preparing lists, timetables, diaries
- Hands-on learning to help engage the senses
- Allow for processing time
- Revise new information daily
- Provide immediate and frequent feedback
- Have a structured environment and routine

3. Difficulties with intellectual processing speed are also very common. CWE will have difficulties in understanding and interpreting information if they are given a lot of new information all at once.

- Give a short set of instructions that are clearly understood by the CWE
- Provide the CWE notes instead of having him/her copy from the blackboard
- Be prepared to re-instruct during a lesson
- A CWE may need extra time to complete tasks
- Where handwriting is affected, a CWE may need a scribe in tests or exams
- A CWE may need to present information through a laptop or tablet computer
- A referral to an occupational therapist may be needed so that a CWE can be given advice on technological support and exercises to improve motor function

4. Academic underachievement.

- A CWE may need more group work or individual attention in core subjects
- A CWE with issues related to dyslexia will require specialist support with phonological awareness and visual approaches to reading

- Provide specialist support tailored to helping a CWE with comprehension, via an individualised reading programme
- In mathematics, the CWE may need hands-on materials

5. Problems with attention/concentration: CWE have difficulty in selecting what to focus on and in reaching their intended goal. They are unable to block out distractions.

- Eliminate distractions in the classroom and place the CWE at the front of the class
- Notice on-task behaviour and positively acknowledge this
- Avoid open plan classroom arrangements if possible
- Use a teacher aide for additional support to maintain optimal attention
- Maintain eye contact with a CWE to ensure that you have his/her attention
- Give short, well-structured instructions
- Emphasize key points and check that the child understands what is expected
- Use pauses when giving instructions and allow time for processing of information
- Insert breaks if necessary as some CWE have trouble concentrating for long periods
- In severe cases of inattention, the presence of ADHD may be considered.

6. Difficulties with social skills and behaviours associated with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). ASD is a disorder involving difficulties in communication, social interactions and imagination. Autism is described as a spectrum because the condition varies from child to child. *Seek additional support from ASD organisations.*

- A CWE will require social skill training at an individual or group level
- Have simple classroom rules
- Avoid known stresses
- Please provide visual supports such as timetables
- Provide a structured teaching and management style
- Redirect rather than confront
- Reinforce appropriate behaviour
- You may provide a 'quiet' space away from the stimulation of the classroom

7. Problems with impulsivity/hyperactivity.

- A CWE may need reward based behavioural programmes/contracts
- A CWE may need regular breaks built into his/her daily timetable
- A CWE may need help with organisational skills by way of visual/written timetables

8. Difficulties with anxiety and/or depression is common.

- A CWE may not talk about how he/she is feeling. Be aware of emotional, intellectual, physical or behavioural changes. Discuss any reported change to the parent/carer.
- A trained professional is likely to be involved such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

9. Determine the cause of challenging behaviours

a) Is the behaviour caused by seizures?

Is the pattern of behaviour similar every time?

Is the person drowsy, confused or sleepy afterwards?

What is the CWE like between outbursts of behaviour?

b) Is the behaviour caused by medications?

When did the problem start? Did it coincide with a medication change?

Is the child off their food or sleep?

When does the difficult behaviour occur? Is it after taking medications?

c) Is the behaviour independent of seizures or medications?

Has the behaviour always been a problem?

Do the changes in medications or numbers of seizures have an effect on behaviour?

Are there identifiable triggers associated to behaviour?

- Take note when challenging behaviours are appearing. Do they appear at a particular time of day or around specific activities? This information may help with a behaviour management plan that are relevant to the needs of the CWE.
- Anticipate problems by planning ahead and avoiding situations that cause stress. Some CWE react negatively towards crowding, excessive noise, room arrangements and less structure, especially during break times.