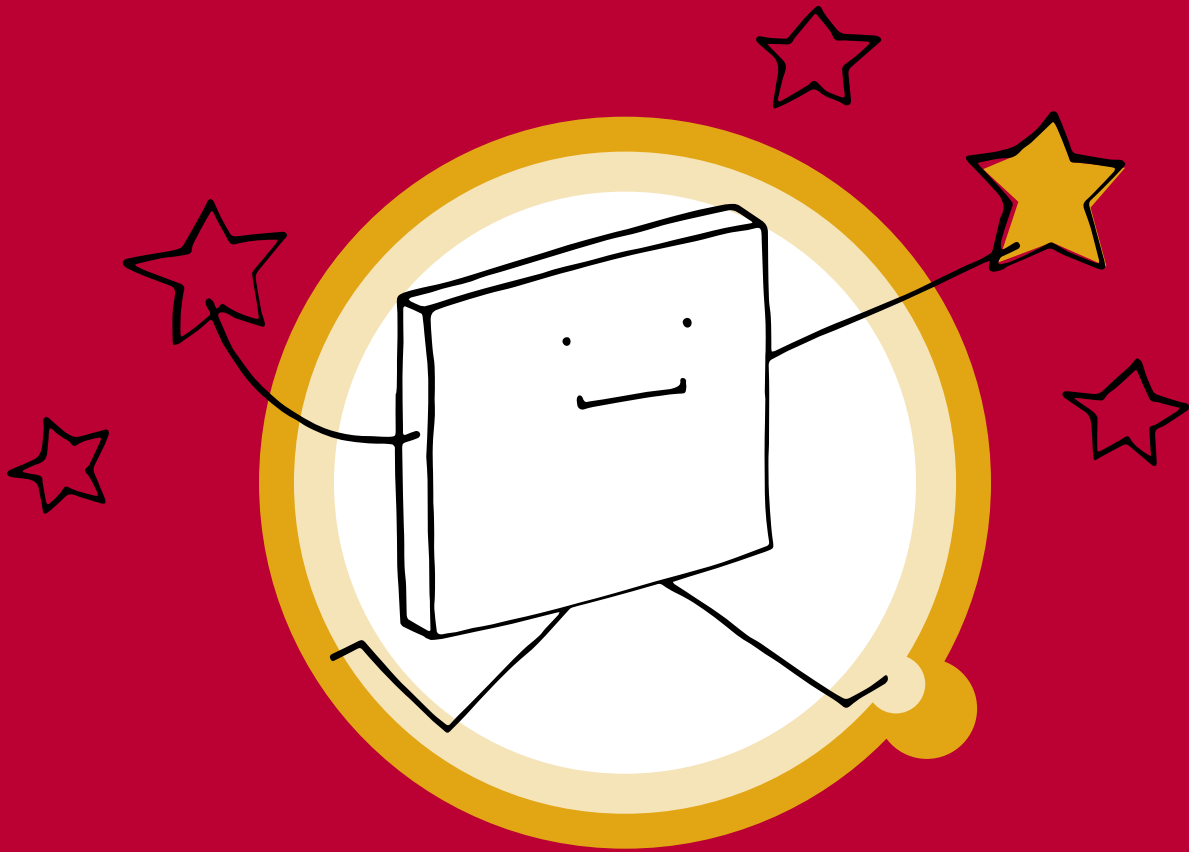


The EPIC Strategy booklet: A guide for parents of neurodivergent children

These strategies apply to all children but are particularly relevant to children with ADHD, autism, Dyspraxia/DCD and those born prematurely.

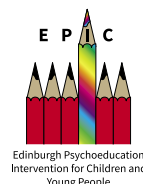
A teacher's version of this book is also available



**Edinburgh Psychoeducation Intervention
for Children and Young People[©] (EPIC)**



THE UNIVERSITY
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EPIC Booklets

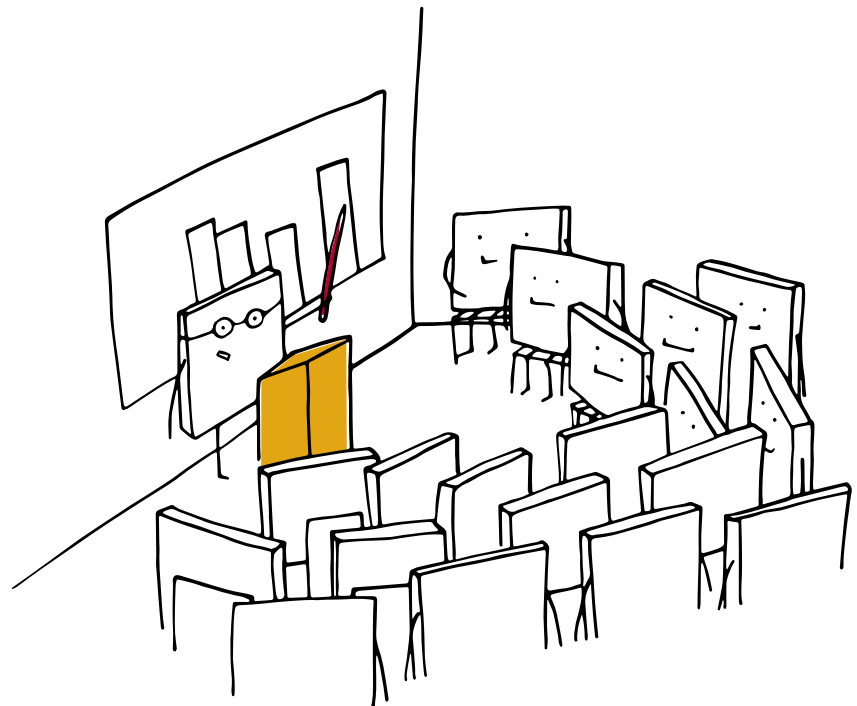
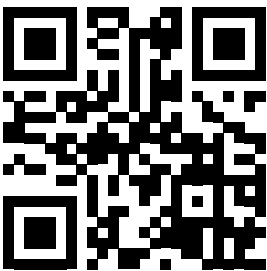
There are two types of EPIC booklets:

- 1) The **EPIC Strengths and Difficulties** booklets.
- 2) The **EPIC Strategy** booklet.

This is the **EPIC Strategy** booklet for **parents of neurodivergent children**

If you would like to read more about thinking skills (executive functions), please see the **EPIC Strengths and Difficulties** booklets.

EPIC Website:
<https://edin.ac/3AVrq3h>



There are also additional articles and resources on our EPIC Blog:
www.epic-information.com

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Notes on terminology

Executive functions: a set of thinking skills that include organisation, self-control, self-monitoring, working memory, time management, flexible thinking and planning.

Difficulties with executive function can make it hard to focus, learn, follow directions, and handle emotions.

Working Memory: sometimes called short-term memory, is the mental workspace where you hold and organise information for a brief time.

Inhibition Difficulties: difficulty with avoiding distractors and generally controlling responses (e.g., gets distracted by noises outside, struggles to stop and think before speaking/taking action, finds it hard to wait their turn).

Some children have **sensory processing differences**.

Sensory avoiding: finding bright light, noises, smells, tastes and textures uncomfortable, overwhelming, or painful e.g. leaving the room when it is too loud.

Sensory seeking: being under sensitive to input and look for more sensory stimulation. Sensory input can help children regulate their sensory processing system and then engage with learning e.g. fidget spinner, or wiggle chair.

A lot of children have a combination of both.

Introduction


Who is EPIC for?



- The principles of EPIC apply to **all children** but are particularly relevant to neurodivergent children. ‘Neurodivergent’ refers to a broad range of conditions including for example autism, ADHD, DCD/Dyspraxia, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and those born prematurely (amongst other diagnosis). However, use of this booklet need not be restricted to those with a diagnoses. This booklet is relevant for those children who have thinking differences that arise for any reason.
- Co-occurrence, when a child has two or more diagnoses, is common e.g. having a diagnosis of both ADHD and autism. It is also very common for a child to have one diagnosis and have traits of another that might not be diagnosed but still impacts how they learn and interact.
- The strategies in the booklet can benefit not only children, but also the rest of the family by maintaining a positive environment and supporting everyone’s understanding.
- At the heart of this approach is understanding the individual child’s **strengths** and **difficulties** regardless of age, gender, or diagnosis. (Please read the EPIC ‘Understanding strengths and difficulties of neurodivergent children’ booklet, before you start using this booklet).
- The strategies described in this booklet are mainly useful for children up to the end of primary school but many may also be useful for adolescents.


Introduction

Should the same strategies be used with every child?




EPIC involves an individualised approach to child development that aims to facilitate learning and positive well-being in children and young people. You can select an area to develop based on what your child is struggling with.

When can parents use the booklet?



Parents can use the booklet at any time. These EPIC materials are very flexible and can be used in a variety of ways.

How else might this booklet increase understanding?



You may have read this booklet with one child in mind, however you may realise there are sibling(s) with similar challenges.

Introduction

How to use the strategies



- 1. Identification:** (Please read the EPIC ‘Understanding strengths and difficulties of neurodivergent children’ booklet, before you start using this booklet. It will help you identify your child’s individual strengths and difficulties).
If you are unsure, playing some of the games /activities listed in this booklet may help you to work out the underlying difficulty. Sometimes a child can seem like they are struggling with attention but really it is a memory problem or sensory issue.
- 2. Understanding for your child:** Many parents are already using these strategies. We are suggesting them as particularly important for children with difficulties. We are also promoting their use with added dialogue. Using strategies enables you to talk about the importance of things like planning or stopping and thinking, and can facilitate your child’s awareness of their difficulties and the need to take steps to help themselves (see example page 41).
- 3. Practise:** Doing the activities encourages your child to practice thinking skills that are not necessarily automatic to them such as the need to stop and think, and identify ways of working in a distracting environment.
- 4. Personalisation:** We encourage parents to develop their own games personalised to their child e.g. games with a toy they like.

Which area to develop?

Before choosing which strategies to try out with your child / children, think about:



Which area would you like to focus on developing?

Planning ahead

Sitting still for a long time

Following instructions

Thinking before they speak

Keeping track of the time

Thinking flexibly

Processing emotions

Starting or finishing a task

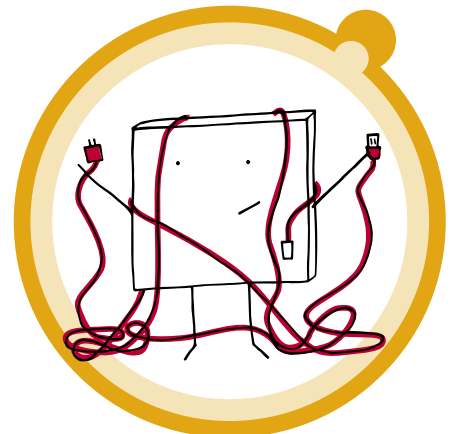
Waiting their turn

Moving from one task to another

Remembering things

Making friends

Staying focused



Which area to develop?

These things can sometimes get in the way of...

Doing school work

Listening or
paying attention

Knowing how you
are feeling

But...

Understanding **the thinking processes behind these difficulties** can help you identify and then manage the barriers to learning.

It is important to try to understand why sometimes your child wants to leave the room, not stay seated, or talk out of turn (sometimes referred to as challenging behaviours). For example, sensory overload, exclusion, or needing a movement break can cause feelings of distress. Recognising and reducing (or removing) triggers can support your child's wellbeing.

Medication

If your child has ADHD they may be taking medication. Medication helps a lot of children with ADHD but does not tackle all the difficulties experienced by children with ADHD. Children with other diagnoses commonly do not take medication. Strategies, like the ones described in this booklet, are important regardless of whether your child is taking medication. See our website for more information on medication.

Next, we are going to explore some factors that underlie learning difficulties and affect well-being. We will pair the difficulties with strategies that can help manage and resolve them.

Inhibition

Starting a task – being prepared

Before your child starts a task or activity, it is important they **STOP and THINK**. Encourage them to think about what they are going to need to do the task before they start. They can plan out what they are going to need alongside what they are going to do.

Starting a task – distractors

Some children find it hard to **STOP and THINK** because they find it difficult to avoid responding to distractors. Often this may feel automatic to your child. This automatic response to a distractor can end up meaning they bypass the **STOP and THINK** process because they are focusing on something else that is not task related.

A key part of starting a task effectively is identifying what may act as a potential distractor(s). This often differs between children.

Think about:

With your child, is it a sensory issue such as being distracted by sounds nearby? Does the distraction reflect something else in the room or outside? Try using the Body Scan technique described on the next page to identify what are key distractors for your child.

The attention section (page **12**) and games section (page **36 & 39**) of this booklet can also be used to target this difficulty.

Inhibition

Body Scan



Sometimes there can be so much happening, it's difficult for your child to know **how they are feeling** or what they are **finding distracting**.

Your child can be encouraged to try 'scanning' themselves or what is around them. This can make it easier to know **how they are feeling** or what they are **seeing, hearing and smelling**.

How to do the Body Scan

Ask them to close their eyes so that they can start the body scan.

Start by thinking about your toes. What can you feel?

Move up your body stopping at your legs, tummy, arms, chest and head to think about what you can feel.

Is anything uncomfortable?

Now listen to what is happening around you.

What can you hear?

Is anything distracting you?

Attention

Some children find things around them very distracting. This can make it difficult to concentrate on a task.



This could be things they see, noises they hear, or a feeling that they need to move their body. These distractions can become intense and make it difficult to stay on a task.

Some children's attention difficulty can lie in shifting their attention flexibly from one part of a task to another.

There are lots of things you can do to help them with this:

- 1. Getting up and moving around**
- 2. Fiddling with an object**
- 3. Taking a sensory break**
- 4. Using attention flexibly: play games/activities for awareness and practise**

Attention

1. Getting up and moving around

Sometimes your child might feel it is hard to stay sitting at their desk for a long time and may need a movement **break**.

You could talk to your child about options for adding movement e.g.:

- Fidget toy (see point 2)
- DIY standing desk – put a sturdy box on top of the table, and place your child’s notebook on top.
- Do a chore – e.g. take a toy back to their bedroom, get the cutlery out and set the table.
- Act out the character’s actions during storytime.

Be open to your child’s suggestions too!

You could try to use these options as mini-breaks in your household for all children.

Attention

2. Fiddling with an object

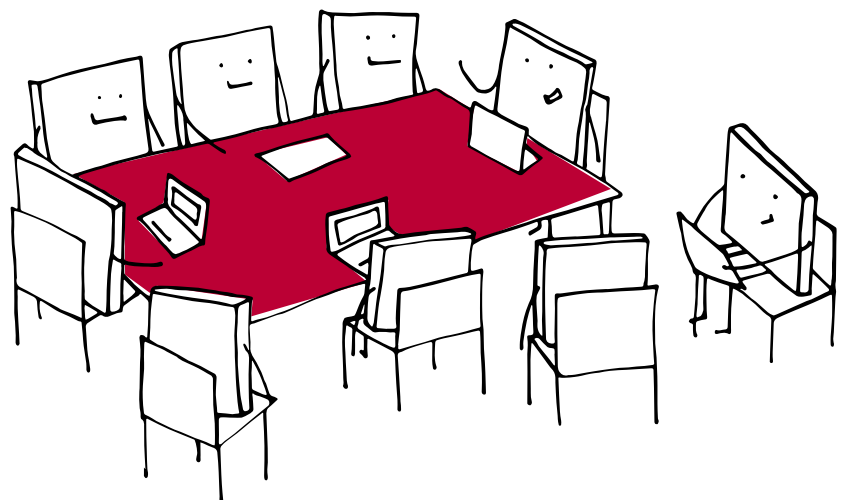
If your child has lots of energy, they might feel like they need to move their arms, legs or move in other ways.

Having an object to fiddle with can be a useful way of managing the distraction of feeling like they need to move.

It is important to choose the right object for your child to fidget with. It is also important to talk to them about when it can be used.

A toy should be chosen that does not distract other children – avoid one that makes any noise or that you find irritating.

Think about whether it will distract your child from the task they are doing. The intention is the opposite but it needs to be the right toy for your child.



3. Taking regular sensory breaks

Sometimes your child will need a **break** from what they are doing or where they are working because the room is becoming over stimulating or they need to get up and move.

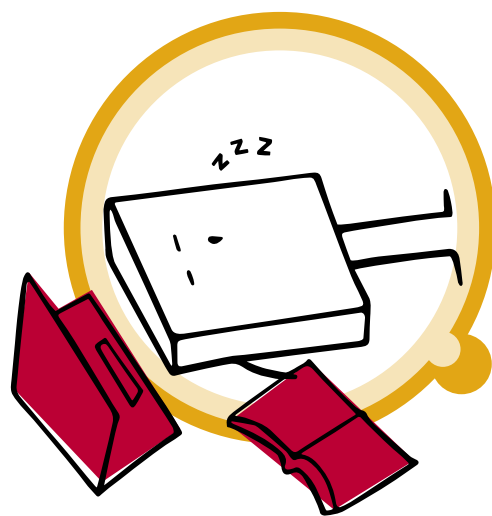
This is something that happens to everyone. Some children need more breaks than others.

A sensory break or “brain break” is taking a short break from seated learning activities. This can help your child to **stay alert, on task, and focused**. For this reason, it is important your child is NOT taken out of PE class or playground time at school and/or outdoor/physical play or extracurricular activities outside of school.

Try using the body scan activity to work out if your child needs a break.

The body scan will help because then they can explain to you why they feel that they need a break. See page **11**.

If they do need a break, encourage them to ask you.



4. Using attention flexibly

Some children's attention difficulty can lie in shifting their attention flexibly from one part of a task to another.

Playing Games for Awareness and Practise.

On page **36** we detail games and activities that can be used to help with attention flexibility such as switching the rules for snakes and ladders, noughts and crosses, or Connect 4.

The games can be used to practise being flexible with your attention and modelling how your child can be flexible with their attention and complete tasks more efficiently.

Also, playing the game may also help your child become aware of and understand their difficulty and learn which strategies they need.

Self-regulation

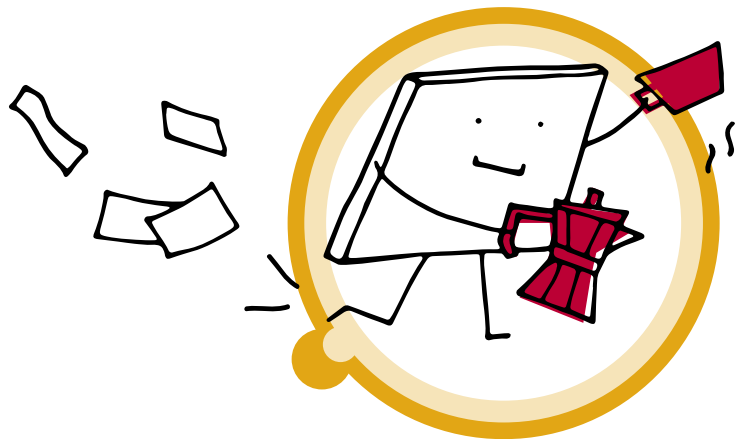
Some children can find it difficult to know how long it takes to do a task, or how much time has passed.

They can also find it hard to notice when they are doing something well or see how they have got better over time.

There are lots of things you can encourage them to do to help them plan ahead and be more organised.

1. Using a timer

2. Keeping a diary

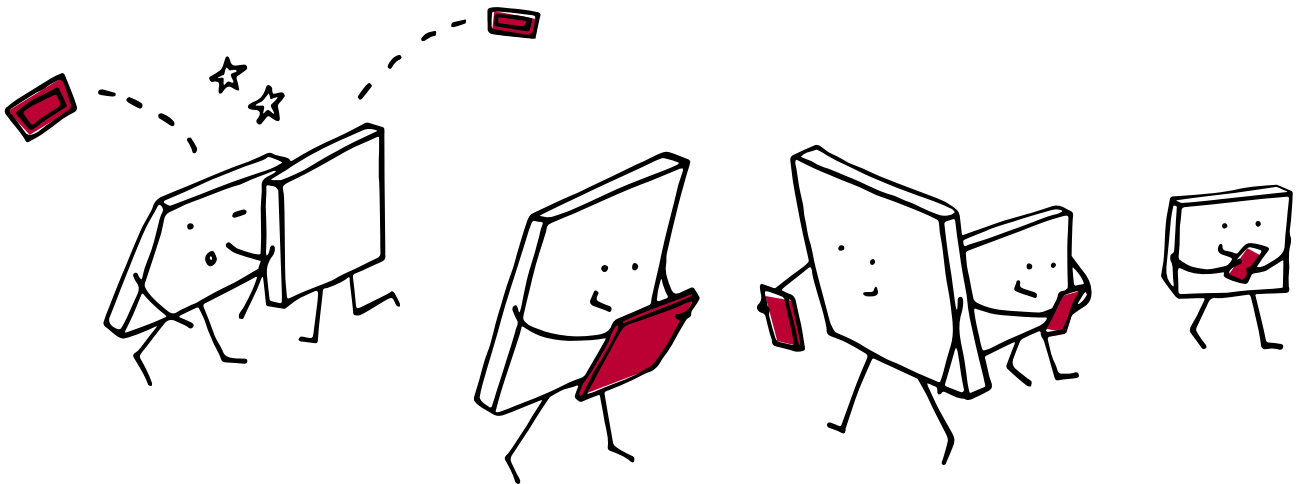


Self-regulation

1. Using a timer

A timer can be useful for some children so that they can visually keep track of their progress.

Sometimes if your child knows someone else is timing them, it can make them feel stressed or anxious. Your child **having control of their own timer** can help them to get used to **sticking to time** and make it easier when they do not have control of the time.

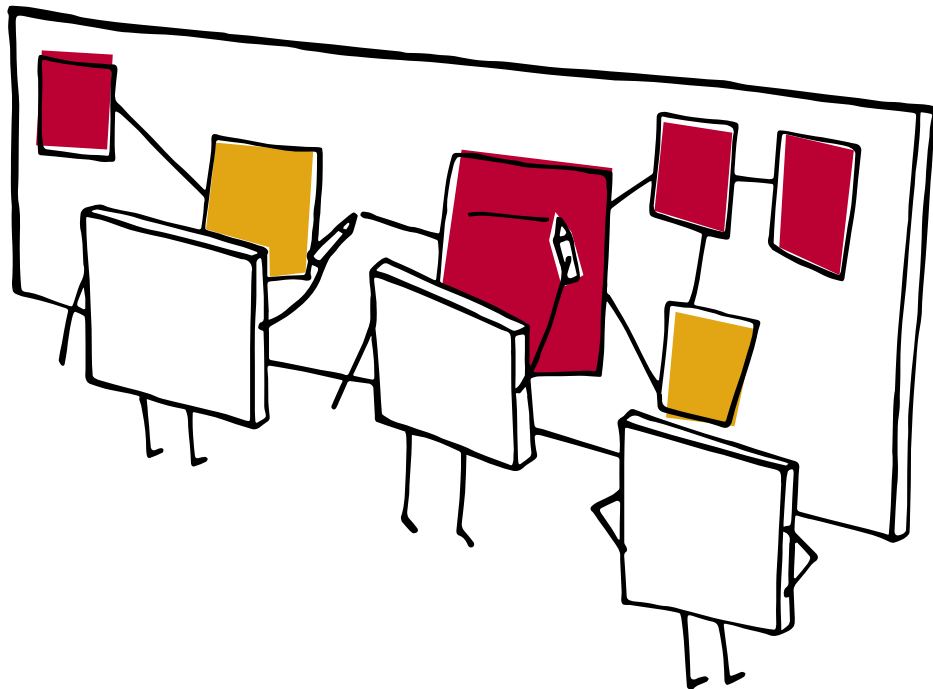


Self-regulation

2. Using a diary or planner

A good way to learn to keep track of time is to **use a diary.**

A diary or planner can be useful for planning a day and for breaking down tasks into multiple steps using colour coding or other similar grouping techniques.



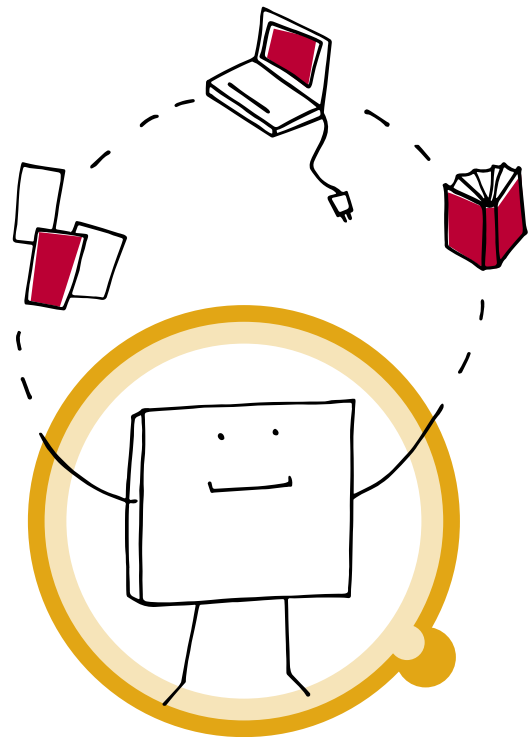
Planning and being organised

Some children “live in the moment” and focus on what is happening now. This means they can sometimes find it hard to think ahead into the future.

This can make it difficult to plan what is coming next. Children who have these difficulties can also find it hard to be prepared as they do not know what they need to complete a task or goal.

There are lots of things you can do to help your child plan ahead and be more organised:

1. Setting goals
2. Step by step planning
3. Mapping it out
4. Using a planner or journal
5. Practising planning



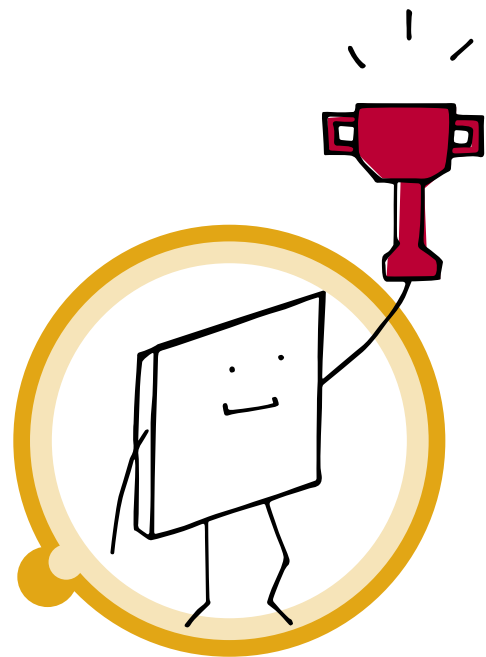
Planning and being organised

1. Setting goals

Setting goals/targets before starting activities can help your child complete a task.

These goals can act as reminders if they get distracted.

1. Encourage them to focus on just one or two goals at a time.
2. Make sure they are realistic goals that you think they could achieve.
3. Set a realistic time to check in and see how close they are to achieving the goal.



Planning and being organised

2. Step by step planning

You can encourage your child to **break down a task** in to smaller, more manageable chunks.



It shows the **order** in which steps need to be done to **reach the end goal**.

If the instructions are in one block of text, encourage them to chunk it into steps.

1. First do this...
2. next do this...
3. then finally do this.

Encourage them to tackle each part one step at a time.

Planning and being organised

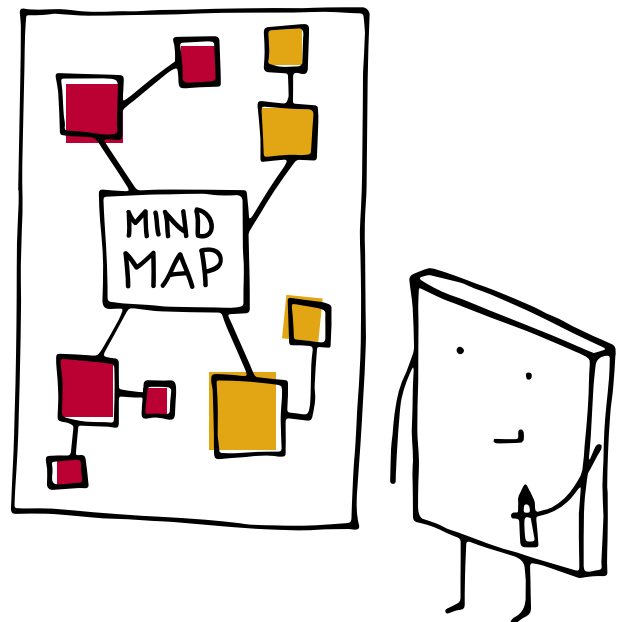
3. Mapping it out

A mind-map is a visual way to organise thoughts and ideas.

A mind-map has a main focus in the middle, with **ideas/themes** branching out from it. Using these branches can represent relationships between ideas.

You could use a mind-map to plan a day, e.g. write 'Saturday' in the middle and add branches for clubs/activities, food, chores etc.

Or you might encourage your child to use a mind map to plan a story. Write "My Story" in the middle of your page and have branches for: Beginning, Middle, End, Characters, Setting etc.



Planning and being organised

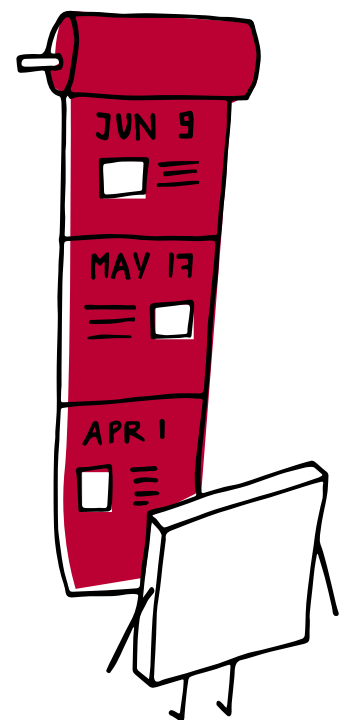
4. Using a planner or journal

A planner can be used to write down notes to remind your child what is coming up next.

5. Practising planning

Page **38** gives some examples of games and activities which give your child a chance to practise planning.

Activities which involve thinking ahead like baking, plastic building blocks or crafting are a great way for your child to practice planning.



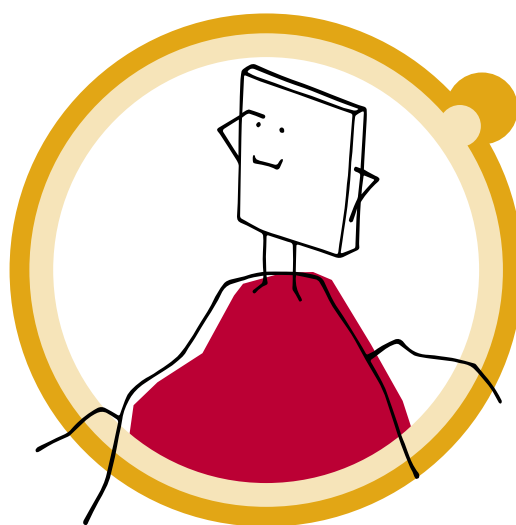
Memory

Some children find it difficult to remember lots of things at once, or they forget things easily.

This can make doing tasks difficult if your child can't remember what they need to do next or forget what came before.

There are lots of things your child can do to help themselves with this:

- 1. Breaking it down (chunking)**
- 2. Writing it down**
- 3. Rehearsing or repeating**
- 4. Representing items visually**
- 5. Active learning**
- 6. Visual aids**
- 7. Mental imagery**



Memory

1. Chunking (breaking it down)

Chunking is breaking down or grouping information to make it easier to manage.



Chunking allows your child to take smaller bits of information and put them together to make more meaningful and memorable wholes. Or to take bigger bits of information and break them down into easier to manage pieces.

Chunking can be used generally to help your child organize themselves such as when following instructions. Chunking can also be used when doing reading and number work.

Example: Following Instructions

If your child finds it hard to remember or process instructions for a task, they can chunk it.

If the instructions are in one block of text, try chunking it into steps.

1. First do this...
2. Next do this...
3. Then finally do this.

Tackle each part, one step at a time.


Example: Reading

Ask your child to find all the 'th' words or the 'ing' words on a page when reading so they learn to group or chunk as a way of remembering (as well as practising phonics).

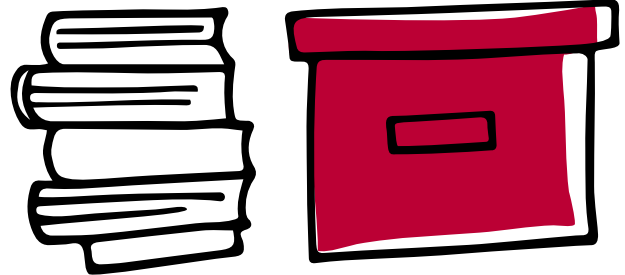
Memory

2. Writing it down

If your child finds it difficult to remember things, encourage them to write it down.



A mini-whiteboard, personal folder, or notebook can be very useful for a child with memory difficulties. When doing a task they can write the steps down and keep looking back to remind themselves what they are doing.



3. Rehearsing or repeating

Rehearsal is a simple memory strategy that involves repeating information in order to get the information processed and stored as a memory.



There are lots of different ways your child can use rehearsal to help at home and at school. It is important your child understands they may need to repeat instructions in their head in scenarios where their peers may not.

Playing memory rehearsal games.

Playing games that use rehearsal can help your child to practice rehearsal, such as the shopping list game or the tea towel game.

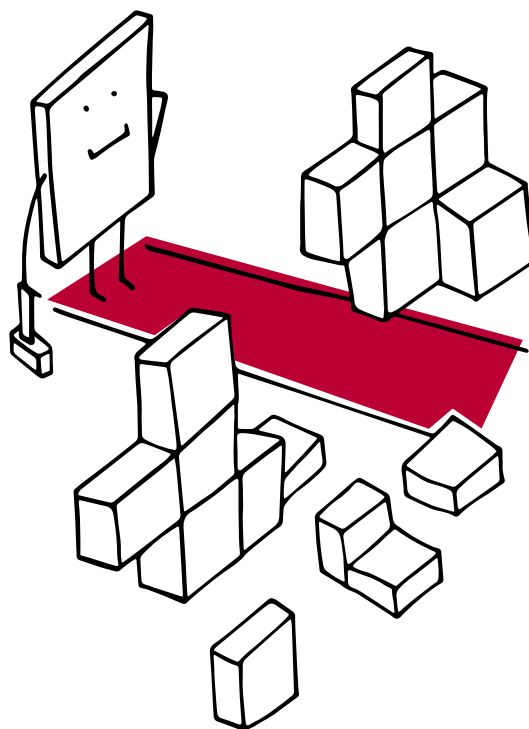
See page **37** and **40** for more examples.

Memory

4. Representing items visually (using manipulatives)

If your child finds it difficult to remember things, think about whether visually representing items could be useful.

Examples include using toy figures or plastic building blocks for number work. Items that are personally of interest to your child may be especially effective to use. Personalisation can help motivate your child to participate.



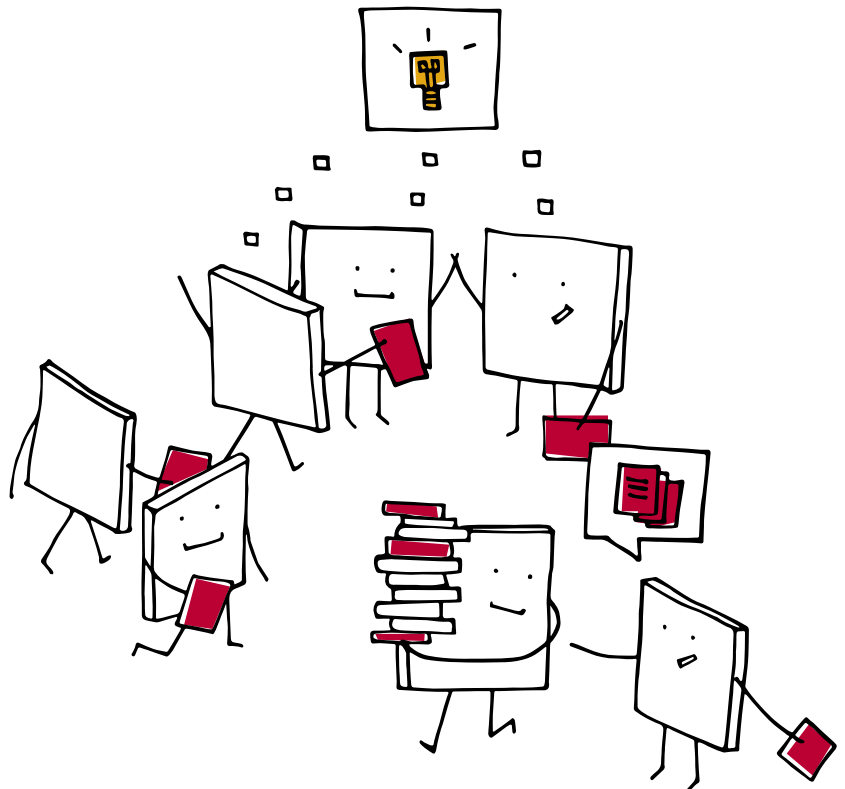
Memory

5. Active learning

Parents can encourage their child to be an active participant in their learning.



Active learning may be **especially** useful for children with memory difficulties. See page **35** for other examples of active learning such as rainbow writing, step writing, singing activity ideas, and using visual aids.

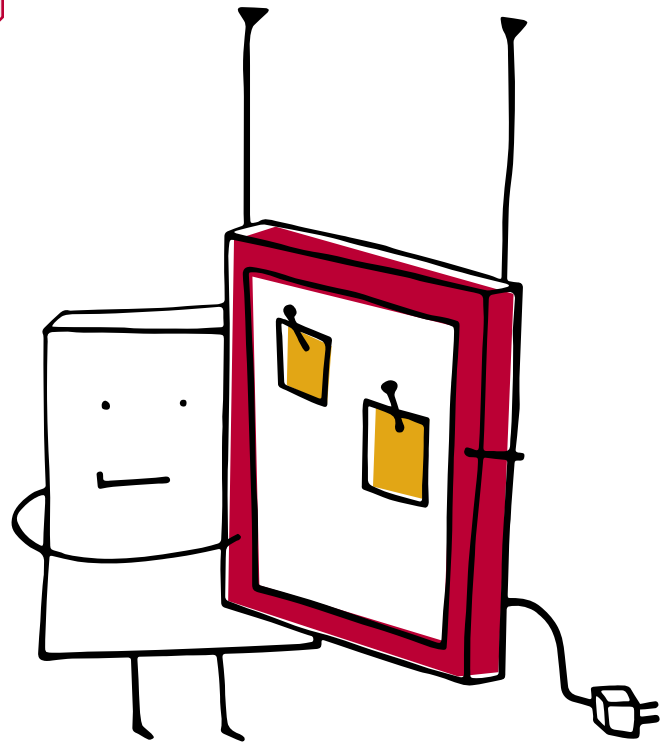


Memory

6. Using Visual Reminders

If your child finds it difficult to remember things think about whether a visual aid such as a mini white board, diary or tablet computer could be useful.

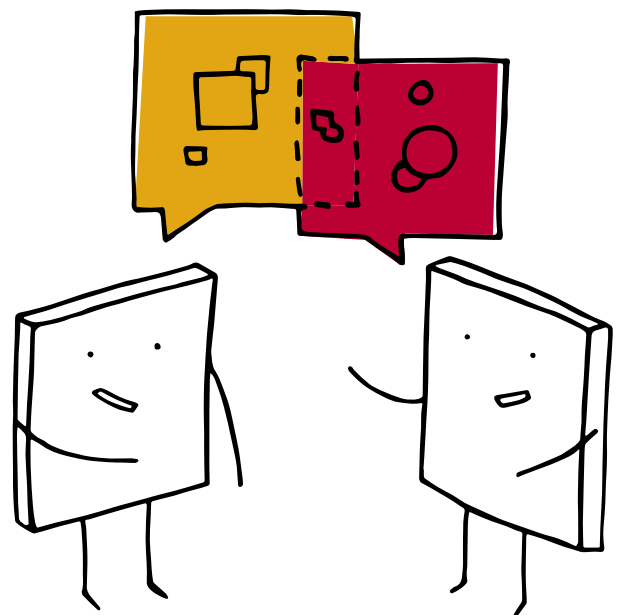
Encouraging your child to have a visual reminder of steps in a task or the different parts of an instruction is a good life skill.



7. Mental imagery

Creating a mental image in your mind to remember an item or a set of items is known to help memory.

An example is remembering lines in a poem or a nativity song. Encourage your child to picture any items in the text in their mind – the more dramatic images they create the better.



Emotions

Reactions to the environment

It is important to be aware and to try to understand why sometimes your child wants to leave the room, not stay seated, or to talk out of turn (sometimes referred to as challenging behaviors). For example, sensory overload or needing a movement break can cause feelings of distress. Recognizing and reducing (or removing) triggers can support your child's wellbeing.

Monitoring responses

Some children are able to stop and think when they get upset and before they act. Others find it difficult to stop and think.

Using the car and brakes analogy

You can explain that everyone gets angry, sad, or overwhelmed from time to time. The analogy of a person being like a car can be used to help your child understand this.

Encourage your child to think of it as some children having good working brakes that allow them to stop and think when they get angry, before they act.

Other children's brakes don't work so well, they might not let them stop at all. What we need to do is work on improving our brakes which involves developing internal (thinking) and external strategies to help this, when our internal ones don't allow us to stop and think.

Emotions

Supporting emotional well-being

Supporting self-reflection

Your child can be encouraged to use techniques that effectively pause their responses and allows them to stop and think. This gives them time to reflect on what is going on around them, how they are feeling, and how they are responding. These techniques can also help your child to take the time to identify the next strategy to use e.g. doing the body scan. They can be used throughout the day.

Also, when your child is upset, these techniques can be calming and relaxing.

Examples of these strategies are:

1. Body scan (described on page **11**)
2. Breathing (page **43**)
3. Visualisation (thinking of a calm situation)
4. Stretching/yoga poses/tensing and relaxing muscles
5. Grounding technique (page **43**)

Other examples of calming items and toys:

Fidget toys, stress ball (e.g. squishy), listening to music, using ear defenders and glitter bottle (they can shake when angry, but also watch glitter falling to calm down).

Supporting well-being

Examples of strategies for supporting your child to process their emotions and reframe their thoughts are on page **42**.

More useful activities and games

Active learning examples

- Use plastic building blocks pieces to remember number bonds – put the answer on one brick (e.g. 10) and two bricks underneath with smaller numbers (e.g. 4 and 6).
- Rainbow writing (each letter in a different colour), stepped letters (e.g. s, sh, sho, shoe) and bubble writing for reading and spelling words.
- Use strategies for spelling that encourage your child to chunk information e.g. Big Elephants Can Always Understand Small Elephants. The first letter of each word spells BECAUSE. Or they can sing the song Mrs D, Mrs I, Mrs FFI, Mrs C, Mrs U, Mrs LTY for DIFFICULTY.
- Use visual resources e.g. plastic building blocks or toy figures to represent numbers for times tables and division personalized to your child's interests.
- Items can also be visually represented using a mini whiteboard, notebook, play clock for time, purse of money for money work.
- Do singing activities for numbers and letters (e.g. search for relevant YouTube videos).

More useful activities and games

Planning, thinking flexibly, inhibition, and strategy use

Snakes and Ladders – Switching the Rules

Play snakes and ladders as you normally would. After a while, **switch up the rules** so that you go down ladders and up snakes. If they make a mistake, use it to talk about how it can be difficult to think about something from a **different perspective** when you are used to one perspective

This game can be used to support counting and adding abilities, as well as changing the rules to encourage thinking flexibly

Use two dice and encourage them to add these up themselves before they make their move. Comment on the different pairings (e.g. five and five, that makes ten – but six and four also makes ten)

Noughts & Crosses / Connect 4 – Planning and Switching the Rules

Noughts & Crosses (aka Tic-Tac-Toe) and 4 in a row are fun games you can play to help your child practice planning and talk about planning.

When playing with them, tell them out loud what your strategy is for winning and encourage them to do the same **to promote strategy use**.

Ask them where they think you might place your next counter **to promote planning**.

Half-way through ask them to switch colour counters with you. Chat through with them the difficulties around switching rules during a task.

Remember to play a few games without doing this as well to **keep it fun!**

More useful activities and games

Memory games

Tea Towel Memory Game

Place a few items on the table and give your child 20 seconds to remember them, then cover them over with a tea towel.

Ask them to list the items that were there.

Increase the number of items to increase difficulty and demonstrate that we can only remember a few things at once.

Encourage your child to use a strategy to remember the items, for example:

Group them together in meaningful chunks (e.g. by colour, item type).

Make up a story to describe all of the items (e.g. the car drove to restaurant and bought a burger with some money).

Sticky notes

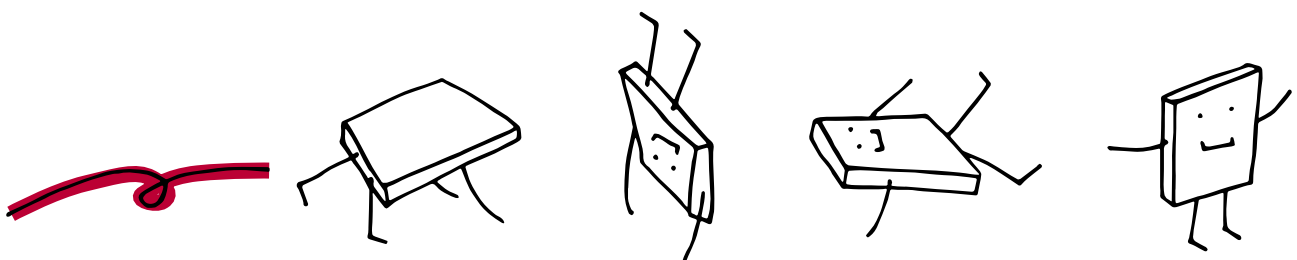
For children with learning difficulties, repeating information in different contexts helps them learn. For example, having sticky notes up around at home and at school with the same spelling words means your child is learning in two contexts.

The Shopping List Game

One person starts and says “**I went to the shops and I bought...**” and adds an item to the list. Let’s say they chose “**apple**”. The next person says “**I went to the shops and I bought an apple...**” and adds a new item to the list.

Most people can only remember 5 or 6 at a time!

Playing games that use rehearsal can help your child to practice this skill.



More useful activities and games

Practice planning

Activities with instructions:

This activity is suitable for any task that needs instructions, Examples include: baking recipes, plastic building blocks, crafting.

Before you start, encourage your child to check:

- What the end goal is (i.e. what are they making?)
- What they need before they can start (e.g. ingredients, equipment)
- Take the instructions step by step, covering up every step except the current one if needed. This will help them to ignore information that is currently irrelevant

Book Review

Reading a book in the context of conducting a book review is a great way to help your child practise recalling information and organising and using it flexibly.

All of these skills are important for planning. These activities will help your child to think about planning in other contexts.

Practising inhibition control

Practising inhibiting an automatic response with ‘Simon Says’

The popular ‘Simon Says’ game can be used to model and practice the ability to stop what your child may experience as an automatic response.

In ‘Simon Says’ your child/children are only to respond with an action instructed by the parent if the instruction starts with ‘Simon Says’. If the instruction is made without ‘Simon Says’ they do not follow the instruction.

When playing the game talk through the difficulties there are in paying attention to the instruction e.g. ‘put your hands in the air’ and responding quickly to that instruction while also paying attention to whether the instruction was preceded with ‘Simon Says’.

Practice the game without encouraging a fast response at first so that the focus is on inhibiting the automatic response at all costs.

Speed up the game by encouraging fast responses perhaps putting children in teams and having a winning team for accuracy and speed. Talk through the difficulties there are at being accurate and fast and how these maps on to doing tasks in the home.

More useful activities and games

Practising remembering sequences

Twist your body

Lay out the mat and give your child instructions one by one (e.g. right hand on blue, left hand on green)

Then ask them to start again but this time give them two or three actions in a row to remember before they are allowed to act them out

Talk to them about how we can only hold a certain number of things in memory at once and that it is important to take it one step at a time.

They can try starting with a sequence they find easy to remember (e.g. two in a row) and then build up to three or four as they improve!

Clapping sequences

Make up a sequence of claps and practise it with your child/children. Once you know it well, reverse the sequence for added difficulty!

Using dialogue

Using dialogue to support psychoeducation

We encourage the use of the strategies in this booklet with the adult adding dialogue to promote awareness and understanding of difficulties.

Here is an example of an adult talking to your child about remembering instructions.

The adult could say:

“Do you notice remembering instructions is something you find hard?”

“How do you find remembering instructions?”

We would suggest avoiding using comparison language like “do you find this harder than your friends?”

The adult can validate the child’s experience by saying, for example:

“That sounds tricky.”

“Yes, remembering instructions is hard.”

“Sometimes ADHD/DCD (or other relevant diagnosis) makes remembering instructions hard.”

The adult can then explain there are strategies which can help by saying, for example:

“You know, there are things you can do to make it easier. You can repeat the instruction in your mind until you have written it in your diary.”

Supporting well-being

Supporting balanced thinking

Some children find it useful to write down their negative thoughts. This activity allows the child to get the thoughts off their chest and feel heard. Then you could both write down some positive thoughts too.

Encourage your child to express their emotions in another way

Your child may like to use colors to express emotions, like scribbling black for angry or drawing blue waves for happy. You can explain to your child that it is okay to experience a range of emotions, e.g. feeling scared, angry, or sad. This activity can help them express those feelings.

Using a worry monster

Your child can write down or draw their worries and then pop it in the monster's mouth. This helps your child get it off their chest and process what is worrying them.

Supporting well-being

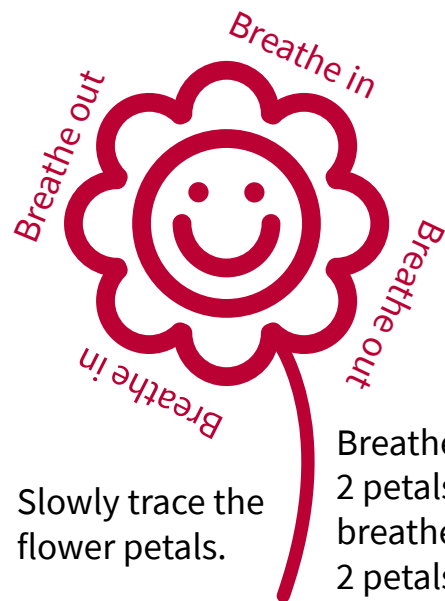
Grounding Technique

Encouraging your child to focus on sensory experiences and their surroundings helps them process how they feel and helps with relaxation.

- 5 Things you can see
- 4 Things you can feel
- 3 Things you can hear
- 2 Things you can smell
- 1 Good thing about yourself

Flower breathing

Encouraging your child to use a visual aid to do deep breathing can help them focus.



Slowly trace the flower petals.

Breathe in for 2 petals, and breathe out for 2 petals.

The EPIC Strategy Booklet

Edinburgh Psychoeducation Intervention for Children and Young People[©] (EPIC)

A guide for parents

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thewaterloofoundation*



We hope this guide has been useful in giving you some ideas of how to help your child with their strengths and difficulties.

We very much welcome feedback on our resources: please contact Dr. Sinead Rhodes at sinead.rhodes@ed.ac.uk with any comments.

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