

Special educational needs

Different countries have different definitions of, and terms for, special educational needs. Broadly, the term refers to learners who experience learning difficulties that make it harder for them to learn than most children and young people of the same age.

Learners with special educational needs experience difficulties because of any one of the following, or some combination of:

Behavioural and social skill difficulties	Includes self-regulation, getting along with others, etc.
Communication or language disabilities	Either receptive or expressive (e.g. autism spectrum).
Concentration difficulties	Either attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or attention deficit disorder (ADD).
Executive functions	Includes difficulties in understanding, planning and organising.
Hearing impairments	Includes both hearing loss and deafness, either congenital or acquired due to illness/injury.
Literacy and language difficulties	Affects the learning process in one or more areas such as reading, spelling and writing (for example, dyslexia and dysgraphia).
Numeracy difficulties	Refers to learners who might struggle with tasks related to numeracy and mathematics competency (for example, dyscalculia).
Mental health issues	Includes depression, anxiety, etc. and can range from mild to severe. Learners can also have more than one mental health problem.
Physical or neurological impairments	Can be congenital or acquired – for example, muscular dystrophy or traumatic brain injury – and can range in severity. Neurological impairment may not be visible.
Visual impairments	Used to describe the consequence of an eye condition or disorder. The degree of impairment ranges from mild to severe.

Gifted and talented learners are also considered to have specific needs if their potential is distinctly above average in one or more of the following domains: intellectual, creative, social and physical.

What other terms are associated with special educational needs?

Access arrangements/accommodations: Learners with special educational needs may benefit from specific access arrangements that take the learner's difficulty into account when assessments or learning tasks are performed. Providing access arrangements does not lower the learning standards. Examples of access arrangements include:

- allowing extended time for tests, exams, or assignments
- allowing for intermittent breaks during the test or exam

- providing a quiet or separate testing area so there are fewer distractions and less noise
- use of a computer instead of handwriting for exams or assignments
- use of a scribe or voice recognition software program which writes a candidate's responses and can then read them back to the candidate
- use of a reader or reading software
- modified test papers – for example, large print or braille.

Attention deficit disorder: ADD is a disorder that causes difficulties with focusing, sustaining and shifting attention. This can have a significant impact on a student's ability to learn.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: ADHD is a regulatory problem of attention, activity level and impulse control and it can have a significant impact on a student's ability to learn.

Asperger syndrome: individuals with Asperger syndrome usually have difficulties with social interaction, social communication and social imagination. They are distinct from those with autism in that they do not have language delays. Due to the similarities between Asperger syndrome and high-functioning autism, there is a debate over whether two different terms are needed and 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' is now commonly used to describe the range of the autism spectrum including Asperger syndrome.

Autism spectrum: although every person with autism is unique, the following characteristics are particularly significant in the diagnosis of autism: communication, social interaction, learning difficulties, unusual/repetitive behaviour/s. Other characteristics can include unusual patterns of attention, unusual responses to sensory stimuli, and increased anxiety.

Differentiated Instruction: involves teaching in an organised, yet flexible way that allows all students in a class to learn; it is not specifically directed for students with learning difficulties. Differentiated instruction takes into account that students have different learning preferences, strengths, and abilities. Instead of teaching to the middle or average student, teachers proactively adjust their teaching to provide for more or less structure, direction, challenge or options depending on the needs and abilities of learners. This includes gifted children.

Dyscalculia: refers to a wide range of learning difficulties involving mathematics. There is no single type of maths disability and it varies from person to person. Children can exhibit visual spatial difficulties or language process difficulties making it difficult to understand 'word problems'.

Dysgraphia: refers to writing difficulties, including handwriting that is either illegible or difficult to read.

Dyslexia: refers to a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling.

Dyspraxia: also known as developmental coordination disorder. Learners with this disorder have problems adequately registering, interpreting, organising or integrating information, and it affects basic and fine motor skills.

Inclusion: refers to integrating learners in the regular school system (and class) as opposed to placing a learner in a special school or class. Learners with special educational needs are provided with the technical, assistive or personal supports needed.



Individual Education Plan (IEP): a teaching and learning plan designed in collaboration with the parent/s, learner, teacher/s and relevant multi-disciplinary team members specifically for learners with special educational needs who have received a diagnosis.

Modification: refers to modifying the learning content and assessment in order to meet the abilities of the learner. This means lowering or raising the educational objectives and expectations.

Pragmatics: refers to the social use of language and/or conversation. This can include problems with initiating communication, difficulty using unwritten rules and inability to maintain conversation on a topic, inappropriate interrupting and an inflexible style of conversation.

Psycho-educational assessment: a systematic process of gathering relevant and valid information about a learner's strengths and needs. It can include testing, such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (6–16 years of age) to measure intellectual performance and help clarify the type of processing deficit. The educational assessment measures what has been learned in different academic areas and helps identify how the disability significantly or negatively impacts an individual.

Remediation: focuses on finding alternative ways to help, mainly, primary school age children learn. It includes any of the following options: reteach the information, use alternative instructional strategies, break tasks down into smaller parts to analyse what the child knows and what components are problematic, reduce the number of items that must be completed, provide additional practice, engage in one-on-one tutoring.

Scaffolding: a strategy used to support all learners and facilitate the construction of meaning and knowledge. Once a learner no longer needs the scaffold or support, it is removed.



Why is it important to understand special educational needs?

Many teachers will encounter learners with different special educational needs throughout their careers. The more knowledge and understanding they have, and the more skilled they are, the more effective they will be in helping learners with special educational needs advance successfully through their school years.

Without suitable support, some learners may find it difficult to access the learning taking place. It is therefore important that teachers have an understanding and awareness of SEN so that they do not make erroneous judgments about the intelligence of the learner and are able to implement suitable strategies to assist them and ensure equality of access.

Addressing and accepting learners with special educational needs speaks to the value of every child and models understanding, flexibility and acceptance of the differences people will encounter not only in childhood, but throughout life.

What are the challenges of special educational needs?

- Teachers and parents need to be mindful in **labelling** a learner as having a disability. While teachers can make significant observations about a learner and his or her behaviour, they are not qualified to diagnose. For example, are the difficulties of a second language learner really 'learning difficulties'?

- It is important to consider if the **environment** is contributing to the difficulties a learner may be experiencing. Schools need to be sensitive to and aware that children's development involves 'readiness to learn' and 'readiness for school'. 'Readiness to learn' means they have the cognitive development needed to learn specific concepts and ideas, and a 'readiness for school' involves a specific set of cognitive, linguistic, social and motor skills that enables a child to assimilate the school's curriculum. Paying attention to the environment means ensuring learners feel safe, supported, stimulated and that the classroom environment is attuned to the individual learning, social, and physical needs of learners.
- The 'one size fits all' is not an effective teaching philosophy. Instead educators would be better to apply the principle of '**each child is unique**'. This requires educators to be flexible and open-minded. Children learn at different paces and have different strengths, challenges and interests. Multiple and complex needs cannot be addressed with one model or formula. It takes considerable time, creative thinking, collaboration, appropriate funding, accessibility, research and educator training on an on-going basis.
- Some countries and organisations may use **different terminology** other than 'SEN'. For example, the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) has started to use the words 'disabilities, difficulties and disadvantages' (DDD) as well as 'SEN'.

Practical tips:

How can schools support learners with special educational needs?

Many Cambridge schools have learners with Special Educational Needs in their classes. Schools can support these students by:

- implementing a **policy** that clearly outlines the services, supports and personnel available for children with special educational needs and make this information readily accessible to parents
- providing opportunities for **parents** to make informed decisions about placement options with adequate time and support and inform them about special arrangements available for Cambridge exams
- working collaboratively as a **team** (teachers, health care workers, social workers, etc.) to provide care holistically for the child with special educational needs
- providing on-going **professional development** training to all classroom teachers and assistants so they are informed. Workshops, online learning, teacher coaching and conferences are potential avenues to address this need.

How can teachers support learners with special educational needs?

Teachers are instrumental in providing a positive and rewarding educational experience for all children. They can:

- **integrate their insights and knowledge** about both the curriculum and their students as learners prior to planning instruction and assessment. A good fit is essential between these two critical components in order to provide appropriate and effective learning opportunities for all students.
- **differentiate instruction**, by providing learners with the structures needed to maximise their strengths, address their weaknesses, and experience timely remediation. This enables students to utilise effective learning strategies and engage with their learning. As a result, student motivation increases and students remain interested in learning.
- make it possible for children to **use recommended accommodations** on an on-going basis, not just for final exams.

How does Cambridge support learners with special educational needs?

Cambridge is committed to ensuring all our schools, teachers and learners around the world are supported during each exam series. We recognise that some learners may require extra accommodations when taking an assessment due to special educational needs. Therefore, centres can request access arrangements such as extra time, scribes and supervised rest breaks.



Where can you find more information?

- *Implementing the Curriculum with Cambridge: A Guide for School Leaders*
www.cie.org.uk/images/134557-implementing-the-curriculum-with-cambridge.pdf
- International Academy for Research in Learning Disabilities: www.iarld.com
- National Center for Learning Disabilities: www.nclld.org/learning-disability-resources/videos
- Rose, J. (2009) *Identifying and Teaching Children and Young People with Dyslexia and Literacy Difficulties*. London: Independent report to the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families.
www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/00659-2009DOM-EN.pdf
- Teaching Students with Autism – A Resource Guide for Teachers: www.bced.gov.bc.ca/specialed/docs/autism.pdf
- World Council for Gifted and Talented Children: www.world-gifted.org
- Young Minds –The Voice of Young People’s Mental Health and Wellbeing: www.youngminds.org.uk
- For further information on access arrangements offered by Cambridge International Examinations, consult the Exams Officers’ Guide: www.cie.org.uk/cambridge-for/exams-officers/cambridge-exams-officers-guide

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