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## Converting Neurodiversity into Neuro-advantage Students on the Spectrum(s) Andrew Fuller

Many neurotypical people spend considerable amounts of their lives fearing what other people might think of them & puzzling about social issues that never eventuate. People on the autism spectrum(s) have some immunity to these afflictions.

Young people on the spectrums vary greatly in their abilities & learning strengths. Each person is different. However, it can be helpful to think about these variations along several main dimensions or spectrums.

<i>Systematic thinking</i>	-----	<i>Empathic thinking</i>
<i>Focuses in on a few thoughts</i>	-----	<i>Links different ideas &amp; thoughts</i>
<i>Interested in 'things'</i>	-----	<i>Interested in people</i>
<i>Desire for routine</i>	-----	<i>Likes change &amp; spontaneity</i>
<i>Narrow range of interests</i>	-----	<i>Broader range of interests</i>
<i>Effectively communicates</i>	-----	<i>Ineffectively communicates.</i>

Each neurodivergent person on the spectrums is different & they are different in different ways. It takes them some time to learn about how to care for themselves best & it takes teachers & parents time to understand how to bring out the best in them.

### Converting Neurodiversity into Neuro-advantage

Kids who are on these spectrums have some challenges ahead in their lives. They also possess attributes & strengths that others do not have.

It is often easier to think about the challenges & overlook the strengths that give these kids advantages. Success in life is more often about capitalising on what you do well rather than improving on what you don't do well.

As thinkers, these kids usually prefer systems & patterns. They often score higher on non-verbal parts of IQ tests & are often suited to careers as programmers, systems analysts, engineers, mechanics, or scientists.

### How parents can help

Parenting methods that can work with neurotypical kids usually don't work with young people on the spectrums.

Many kids on the spectrums have command avoidance which means the 'do as I say' approach that may work with some neurotypical kids, never works with these kids. Trying to force one of these kids to do something they really don't want to do is not only pointless, it's exhausting. Applying rewards & enforcing consequences does not work.

Special interests are one of the great joys of these kids. Identifying these passions & learning strengths & building on them increases their confidence & success. Usually, these kids do not have a wide range of interests, preferring to develop strengths in a narrow range of areas.

Complete the analysis of learning strengths at [www.mylearningstrengths.com](http://www.mylearningstrengths.com) & use the free letter to create a conversation about building on the identified strengths. Discuss these with your child's teacher(s). A full report is also available outlining a full range of strategies, strengths, & possible future career areas.

We create success when we start from what is strong.

### **Spatial reasoning**

While these kids may not interpret emotions in faces that accurately, they are often cued into visuals & many have learning strengths in spatial reasoning.

Presenting daily learning & household routines visually is often a successful approach. Visual planners that show different activities throughout the day can assist in shifting from one activity to another.

Using visual timers that show how long it is before something happens can also be useful.

Associating different feelings – hungry, angry, tired, lonely, stressed- with different colours helps them to identify & express their feelings.

### **Perceptual and motor skills**

Many kids on the spectrums are adepts at using their perceptions & motor skills in learning. Some will have set physical routines for calming themselves when they are upset. Often known as 'stimming', it is best to accept their use of these methods.

Knowing the sensory sensitivities of these kids not only calms them, it can also help their learning. Some are sensory seeking & like specific textures, shapes, or aromas. Others

are sensory avoiders who become overwhelmed when they perceive the world too vividly or intensely. Others are sensory distractors who act in interesting ways to divert their sensory overload. These sensory sensitivities when accommodated for, help them to maintain an appropriate level of arousal so they can learn.

In school, seats that allow them to move, such as wobble chairs help.

Some kids with learning strengths in perceptual & motor skills learn physical routines really well & some enjoy quite arduous 'heavy work'.

### **Concentration and memory**

These kids need consistency, but they also need stimulation to concentrate. The aim is a state of relaxed stimulation.

The sensitivity of kids on the spectrums means they often have great memories for specific areas of information & a complete disinterest in others. Concentration can be increased by noise-cancelling headphones & preferential seating in classrooms.

No one has unlimited concentration or memory, so it is always helpful to know what the main things we need to focus on & for how long.

Advance knowledge helps. For example, *'this is the work we are going to first then we are going to do....'* It is useful to have these kids repeat back or paraphrase directions.

We need strategies to initiate & sustain concentration such as-

- Checklists for task/routine completion
- Extra time on tests & assignments
- Exercise & movement breaks
- Reminders to keep track of time & to remind them to shift to different activities or tasks.

### **Planning and sequencing**

Kids with learning strengths in this area love routines & predictability. This means they are able to deepen their learning & develop skills.

We can increase the predictability of plans through printed schedules or checklists using both words & pictures. We can develop thinking routines such as finding the main idea, looking at how ideas link together & differentiating ideas that are similar from those that are different.

Deepening their thinking is often easier than developing flexibility in their planning & sequencing.

Giving advance notice if there is to be a change in plans helps kids prepare. However not every change can be anticipated.

It is helpful to do advance planning unexpected changes in routines & likely problems. This empowers kids to work out possible solutions rather than panicking. When life throws a curve ball into our usual plans it can be useful to have a menu of coping strategies often depicted visually.

Some of these kids are great at planning but find it hard to get started. Take a load off these kids minds by suggesting options, *"Would you like to do ... first or ... first?"* If they refuse those, add another option & repeat, *"So would you like to do ... ( new option) or .... or ... first?"* Let them make decisions.

## **Thinking and logic**

The intricacy of thinking of kids with this learning strength can be phenomenal.

Some are literal thinkers who learn best when we provide concrete real-world examples. For example, time as an abstract concept is more easily understood when we start from time elapsed on a clock or a yearly diary or a calendar.

Others are more ruminative thinkers. They almost wear out their ideas with overuse. Help them to embellish upon their ideas by developing thinking chains. For example, the first idea leads to the second idea ...

Some get stuck when we need to choose to follow different thinking pathways. Develop decision making trees & algorithms. Visually mapping ideas using logic & show how conclusions can lead us to crossroads where we can follow branch roads.

*Jane thinks Ali is good at drawing. Is Ali good at drawing? (maybe)*

*Should I ask Ali to paint my portrait (maybe)*

*That is a safe road to cross but it's very dangerous at rush hour. Will it be safe tomorrow? (depends on what time)*

*Should I cross the road at 5 pm? (no)*

*Should I cross at the traffic lights at 5 pm? (yes)*

*The sign says it is safe for experienced swimmers only.*

*Does that mean if you swim a long way out you will be safe? (not necessarily)*

## **People smarts**

Even if these kids are not especially interested in people, developing this learning strength as much as they can, will have benefits.

Some kids on the spectrums master the art of masking & can go along with whatever their friends might be doing. While is usually good, there are times when it all goes pear-shaped.

The world of social interactions can be perplexing & anxiety provoking for some. Developing acting & drama skills can be a way of rehearsing social situations, trying out different social behaviours & increasing range of their repertoire of responses.

Learning 'people reading' & conversational skills is a major long-term advantage.

## **Language and word smarts**

Kids on the spectrums with strengths in this area can create articulate & expressive stories.

Pairing pictures & visuals with reading passages often increases comprehension.

Some will find it difficult to get started in creative writing so a series of story & sentence starters can be handy. Having a word bank of vocabulary terms that can be used in writing assignments lowers anxiety & procrastination.

Outlines of story formats & structures & essay writing can serve as a system for successfully building this strength as can checklists for editing & graphic organisers.

A number of technological apps are available to assist neurodivergent kids in this area including:

- Audiobooks & podcasts
- Youtube clips
- Speech-to-text software
- Word prediction software
- Opportunities for oral rehearsal (audio recording answers before writing them down)

This learning strength can be developed through theatre sports, acting & for some, debating.

The intensity of life for some of these kids means they will seek calm & refuge in graphic novels.

## **N**umber smarts

Having number smarts as a learning strength is a major advantage. Developing numerical systems for organising, ordering & classifying information often suits the pattern seeking styles of kids on the spectrums. This also increases concentration and memory as well as deepening understanding.

Obscure mathematical facts appeal to many of these kids as is using mathematical processes to prove a theory. Some will be drawn to STEM subjects. Teaching the scientific process- research, hypothesising, experimentation & refinement of ideas or hypotheses can also be helpful.

Try to relate numbers to physical activities- distance, speed, force, or impact. Use real-world examples to help them to comprehend mathematical concepts.

## **N**ext steps

Schools could ask parents & students to complete the assessment of learning strengths & use this as a basis for collective planning over the next term. This could also be integrated with career planning for senior students.

Schools could also host professional development sessions on neurodivergence & learning strengths to build on the strengths of all students.

It is essential that we regard neurodivergence as a strength rather than as a deficit & applaud, support & build the strengths of all of our wonderful young people.

## **M**ore information

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Andrew's website

[www.mylearningstrengths.com](http://www.mylearningstrengths.com) has helped over 100,000 young people to discover their learning strengths.

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**On face book:**

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Learning Strengths

**Books for Parents**

*Unlocking Your Child's Genius*

*Tricky Behaviours*

*The A to Z of Feelings*

*Tricky Conversations.* (Amba Press)

**Book for Teachers**

*Guerrilla Tactics for Teachers*

*Neurodevelopmental Differentiation- Optimising Brain Systems To Maximise Learning* (Amba press).

