

Helping Students with Difficulties Comprehending verbal information in the Classroom

Many factors can come into play when determining why a child is having difficulty understanding verbal information within the classroom. Determining the true nature of a child's difficulty can be complicated. Comprehension of information can be affected by: lack of sleep, poor nutrition, allergies, anxiety, depression, emotional upheaval, lack of attention, hearing deficits, low vocabulary skills, problems with processing auditory information (separate from hearing deficits), difficulty hearing words in noise or difficulties with understanding sentence structures. Here are a few suggestions to assist children within the classroom, regardless of the nature of their difficulty.

Visual Information

- Demonstrate each step of a multi-step instruction by drawing it on the board
- Write out each step of the instruction
- Perform a demonstration of the task first
- Provide pictures of important vocabulary items

Presentation of Verbal Information

- Prepare your students to listen. Provide a consistent cue to listen before starting instructions
- Set the expectation that all children have 'mouths quiet, bodies still, hands free of distraction, ears listening, and eyes on the speaker' before you start speaking
- Provide positive feedback to the classroom whenever all 'eyes are on the speaker'
- Give instructions one step at a time
- Set the expectation that children must listen for the whole instruction before starting a task
- Alert the children as to how many steps will be in an instruction before saying them
- Use short, simple sentences
- Restate questions or paraphrase information if the student doesn't understand
- Chunk longer information into smaller chunks
- Provide students with preparatory questions or hints about what they need to listen for (e.g. the type of information or the most important information)
- Pause in between each instruction or chunk of information, allowing the students to process one instruction before moving on to the next one. Some students need between 10 and 20 seconds to process information.
- Repeat instructions; some children need to hear information three or four times

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- Speak clearly and slowly
- Emphasize important words by saying them louder and by repeating these words
- Alert children when something is especially important for them to hear
- Present verbal information while facing the classroom

Pre-teach Vocabulary:

- Discuss new vocabulary terms before using them in classroom discussions
- Provide examples and pictures
- Use word webs: talk about where you find it, what it looks like, what it's used for, etc.
- Repeat the new vocabulary terms many times to improve recall
- Link vocabulary terms to something they may have experienced in real life

Comprehension Checks:

- Ask children to restate the instruction in their own words
- Ask the class what is the first step, the second step and the last step

Teaching Strategies:

- Encourage students to put up their hands and ask questions if they don't understand
- Encourage the children to check with a friend in the classroom
- Encourage students to look at the pictures and/or words on the board to see what to do next
- Encourage the children to look around the classroom to see what others are doing
- Ask the children what they will do if they forget the instructions
- Provide positive reinforcement to students when they use these strategies

Seating Arrangement:

- Seat children who have difficulties understanding language at the front of the classroom, away from visual distractions, in a place where they can see your face and be most likely to hear you
- Seat students away from the door, hallway noise, fans, computers or other classroom sounds
- Pair children who have comprehension difficulties with stronger students

Background Noise:

- Utilize soft cushions (e.g. tennis balls) on chair legs
- Set the expectation that children will put their hands up to ask for help instead of calling out
- Set the expectation that students will walk up to people and speak to them instead of calling across the classroom
- Use an FM amplification system whenever possible

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