

Hydrocephalus and Learning

A guide for children and young people with hydrocephalus - with tips and ideas to help you at school



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Hydrocephalus and Learning

How do you learn best? Do you remember things you hear or see? Does it help if you repeat things lots of times? Everyone is different!

Learning can be difficult sometimes for everyone. Having hydrocephalus can make learning even more difficult. Some people with hydrocephalus find it hard to remember things. Others find it hard to concentrate. This can be confusing and frustrating. This booklet explains why hydrocephalus can make learning difficult and what you can do about it.



So why do I find some things difficult?

Hydrocephalus happens when too much liquid builds up inside the head. This liquid is called cerebrospinal fluid or CSF. As the CSF cannot get out, pressure builds up and everything gets a bit squashed. Some people have medical conditions of their brain which can cause hydrocephalus, and these can also make learning more difficult. These conditions can affect the way we think, learn and feel. Having a shunt or ETV to let the extra CSF out of your head will help you feel better, but probably won't help with learning.

The brain has all sorts of important jobs, such as making sure we don't forget things. The changes that people with hydrocephalus might have to their brain means it may not be able to do these jobs so well. This is why you might find it hard to remember things.

The good news is that if parts of the brain do not work well, other parts of the brain will try to help out. This means that if you do find things difficult, there are some things you can do to help. This leaflet talks about things young people with hydrocephalus can find difficult. Of course, everyone is different, so these problems might not apply to you. If you recognise some of the problems there are tips which can help.

Memory

Everyone gets forgetful sometimes. Some people forget where they have put things. Others forget what their teacher has told them to do, or what they have just tried to learn.



Memory Tips

Having hydrocephalus can make it harder to remember things. The good news is you can improve! People with hydrocephalus can get better at learning things if they practise.

- Make a fun and colourful wall chart to remind you what to take to school each day
- Choose a favourite notebook to keep with you. Write down important things people tell you, or ask them to write in your book. You could also make a list of things to do. Remember to keep checking your list during the day.

- Use a Homework Diary. Write exactly what you need to do and when to hand it in by. Ask your teacher to explain your homework if you don't understand. Your teacher could help you write it down.
- If you can't remember the exact word for something, describe it. This will help you or the person you are talking to, to work out the answer.
- Clues can help you remember things. Your brain may have stored the information but just can't find it! Ask people to give you clues to help you remember, or read back over your work to jog your memory.
- When revising, decide the important things you need to learn. Underline these with colours, or write them out again. Keep them short. Test yourself, or get someone else to test you.
- Try saying things you want to remember out loud, and repeat it a few times
- A scrapbook with photos can be a fun way to remember important events. Write about your thoughts and feelings to help jog your memory.
- When you are not at school set the alarm on your mobile (if you have one) to remind you what you need to do.
- Everyone is different so think about how you learn best. Some people make up a rhyme or song to help remember things, others learn by doing things!
- Try not to worry. Worrying makes it harder to remember. Don't be afraid to tell people that you find it difficult to remember things.

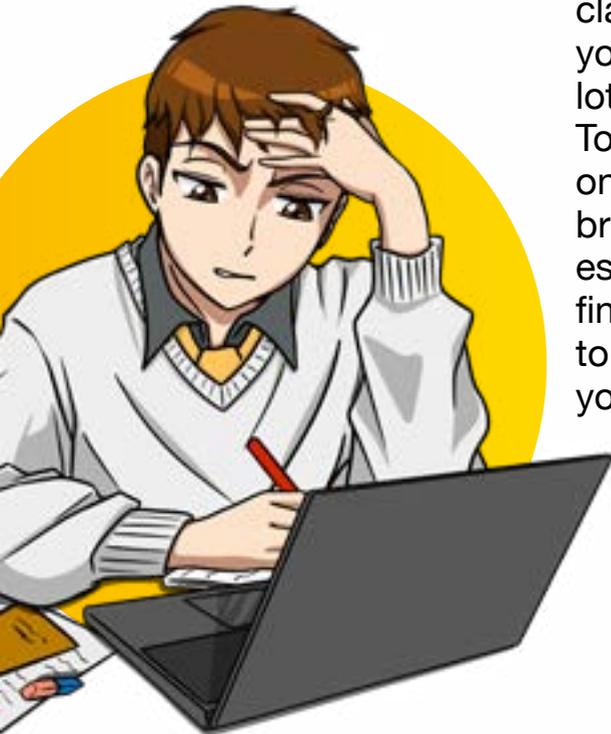
Processing Speed

(working things out)

Your brain has to process information like a computer. Hydrocephalus can make your brain sort out information slowly. This makes it hard to think quickly. It can be hard to take in lots of information at once. This is why long or complicated instructions can be difficult to understand.

You may understand each word on its own, but too many at once don't make sense! Your brain needs time to work out what it means. It can be harder if you feel worried or rushed.

If you cannot think quickly it can take longer to do things, such as finishing your work, or keeping up with other people in your class. It can be hard for your brain to cope with lots of things at once. Too much information at once can overload your brain! Keeping up can be especially difficult if you find it hard to hold a pen to write neatly. Talk to your teacher about any difficulties and you could show them the tips opposite. They might have other ideas that could help.



Tips to help you keep up

- **Tell your teacher** and other important people that it takes you longer to take things in. Then they should try to give you more time.
- **Ask for written instructions** or handouts so you don't have to worry about writing everything down. You can focus on listening instead. If your brain only has one thing to do at a time, it will do it better!
- If you find it hard to write and remember what you're writing at the same time, **ask your teacher** about learning to use a computer to type what you want to write.
- You may be able to **get a spare copy of textbooks** to take home. If you find it hard to keep up in a lesson you can go over it again at home. If you have a computer at home you could look things up on the internet.
- A **mobile phone could be used** to record things so you can play it over again. This gives you more time to understand, and it might help your memory too!
- It's fine to **ask for instructions to be repeated**, or given more slowly, if you need to write them down.
- **Try not to panic** about keeping up. If you feel stressed it will be harder to keep up.

Concentrating



It can be hard to break off concentrating on one thing to then concentrate on something new, for example at change of lessons. It can be hard to concentrate for a long time. You might get tired more easily from trying so hard. When you are more tired it makes it even harder to concentrate! You may find it hard to block out noise from other people, which may distract you.

It can be difficult to pay attention to two things at the same time. This can be a problem when you are trying to listen and take notes in class at the same time.

Tips to help you keep up

- Try to find a quiet place to work. It is harder to concentrate with the TV on or people talking. You may need to tell people that you find it hard to concentrate when it is noisy.
- Do your homework at a time of day when you concentrate best. This might be as soon as you get home from school or after you have had some tea. You will concentrate better if you are not too tired, so don't put off homework until almost bedtime.
- Try working hard for 30 minutes and then having a short break before starting again. This gives your brain a rest before you start work again.
- Ask your teacher to tell you when lessons or subjects are going to change, 5 minutes before. This will help you 'unwind' so you're ready to concentrate on the next lesson when it starts, and you don't miss important instructions
- If you are worried, talk about your worries with an adult you trust. Try not to worry about how well you are doing, as long as you are doing your best.

Planning and Organising

People with hydrocephalus can find it difficult to be organised. Planning ahead can be confusing. They may get confused about what they need for each lesson, or even which lessons they need to be at! This may be to do with memory problems, but also the part of the brain which works out what order things go in, may not be working well. Even organising a piece of work may be difficult. It can be hard to know where to start, or what to do next, or how to finish a piece of work, especially if you have to write a conclusion.

Tips for being organised

- Create your own school timetable using pictures or colours. This will make it easier to work out what you are going to be doing each day.
- Keep some things in the same place in your bag so you know where to look for them. You can use coloured plastic wallets to keep things for each lesson together. Always check your notebook for things you need to remember. Keep it tidy. Tick off the things you have done.
- Set goals for things you want to get done. Give yourself rewards when you do them, such as going out with your friends or watching your favourite TV show.

Tips for planning your work

- Don't rush into things. Take your time to work out how you are going to do something. It can be hard to stop yourself, but you can get into a muddle if you rush into it.
- Get your instructions written down before you start a piece of work. Then you can focus on thinking about how you are going to do it, without worrying about remembering what you are supposed to be doing!
- Break a new task down into small steps. This makes it look less scary and helps you get started. Do one step at a time. Tick them off when you have done them. Ask someone else to help you with this to start with.
- If you aren't sure what order to do things in, write them on post-it notes or small pieces of paper. You can then move them around to find an order which makes sense.

Spatial Problems

(understanding what we see)

This is to do with how our brain understands what our eyes see. It is not about how well our eyes work. It can be tricky going down stairs if you cannot tell how far it is from one step to another. Some people find it hard to ride a bike. Other people have problems finding their way around new places. It can be scary if you can't find your way around a new school. Spatial difficulties can make lots of things hard, such as: building towers with blocks, doing jigsaws, hitting a ball, setting up science experiments, doing maths puzzles with diagrams, or even writing neatly.



So what about subjects like maths?

Lots of people have trouble with maths, even if they don't have hydrocephalus!

Tips to help with spatial problems

- If you find it hard to write or read on a flat surface tip the book upwards. You can get special desks or pads to help you do this, or Velcro stickers might help.
- Practising helps. The more you do something, like climbing stairs, or finding your way round school, the better your brain gets at it.
- Play games that involve building or making things.
- Try thinking about puzzles that have diagrams by describing them with words. Talk about them or ask someone else to talk about them with you.
- Do things one step at a time, and don't be put off if you find it difficult at first. Everyone finds new things daunting. Practising will help you get better.

People with hydrocephalus might find it especially hard. Maths involves lots of the things we have talked about, like memory, concentration, planning, and spatial skills. Still, this doesn't mean you can't get better at it! If your teachers and your parents understand what you find hard then they might be able to find ways to make it easier. It really is important that you understand every stage thoroughly before you go onto the next. You may need more practise to make sure you've really got it.

Sensory Problems

Everybody experiences the world differently, so you may need more or less of a particular sensory experience than other children.

You may have challenges with sensory processing and may find it difficult to work out what is happening inside and outside of your body.

Sometimes how we behave can be caused by difficulties with processing all the information coming into our bodies and brains.

Senses

Our senses are how we get information from the world around us.

We have at least 8 including touch, sight, sound, smell and vestibular (balance).

Sensory processing

is how our brain gets, sorts out and uses the information we get from the world around us. It helps us develop all the skills that we learn and use in life.

There are two types of sensory processing difficulties:

You can experience **too much** or **too little** of a particular sense.

For example, if you are **over sensitive** to sound, you might find loud noises painful, and they might cause you to get upset.

Or if you are **under sensitive** to touch, you may get lots of comfort from being hugged, wrapped tightly in a blanket, or squeezing into small spaces.

There lots of ways our senses can make life more difficult. Talk to a teacher or your parents if this sounds familiar. Occupational Therapists can look at ways your senses may be making things difficult, and give you some ideas to try.





Getting on well with your teachers

Lots of teachers may not know about hydrocephalus. They will not know what it is like to have hydrocephalus.

They might think you are not listening to them, or that you need to try harder.

Teachers can get upset when they think you are not listening to them. This can make you feel angry with them.

Some people with hydrocephalus can find it hard not to show people they are angry. When we show we are angry with the teachers we can end up getting into trouble.

Sometimes people stop trying hard at school so that they don't feel silly when they get things wrong. This is understandable.

Tell your teacher that you need their help, ask to see the teacher during breaktime, in private, if this is more comfortable for you.

It is important you get good help from your teacher. You need to help them understand what you find hard. Teachers don't always know everything! They cannot guess what you are feeling. If they know you are trying very hard, they will want to help you more.

If you prefer, ask another adult you trust to talk to your teacher about hydrocephalus. There is special information for teachers to help them understand how hydrocephalus can affect your learning.

They can get this from Shine. You could also show them this booklet.



Getting on well with others



Sometimes it is hard to get on with other children at school. This can be very upsetting and can happen to anyone. If other children at school are making you feel unhappy then talk to an adult you trust. Don't keep it all to yourself.

It is important to take turns when you are talking to people. Practise good listening so people know you are trying hard to listen to them. If you find it hard to understand what someone means, make sure you explain this to them. Then they know that you do want to understand. Ask people questions about what they like and find interesting, and listen to what they say.

If you find it upsetting when things change, for example extra children joining your game, try practising games where the rules change at home. Ask your parents to try changing things for you a little bit at a time, to help you get used to changes.

Ask your parents if you can invite your friends to your house to play, or for tea. When they come, take turns choosing what to play or watch

If you find it hard to think of things to do at break time, ask if the playground staff could start some games.

Getting Help

If there are things that you are finding difficult there are solutions too. The most important thing is for you, your parents, and you teachers to understand what you find difficult. Then you can work together to find out how you learn best.

Think about all the things you have learned more easily, why did you find them easy? Were you doing something practical? Were you listening to music? Did you get plenty of opportunity to practise? Was there something odd, funny, or exciting about them? If you can work out how you've learned things in the past this will give you valuable clues about how learning can be made easier in the future.

Shine's Early Intervention Support and Development Workers will be happy to help. They may be able to come up with ideas your teachers or your parents haven't thought of.



Here for you. If you need us.

If you're having problems at school or anywhere else, Shine is here to help. Just give us a call, or ask your parents to, or you can visit our website for lots of useful information and support.



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