

Case study

Danielle is an 8-year old girl who has been diagnosed with autism and dyslexia. She has a 4-year old younger brother who is normal. Danielle has significant problems with communication and only responds to voice commands. She has problems with the use of language and speaks in very simple sentences. She avoids making eye contact with the people talking to her. She tries to seek attention by throwing tantrums and harming herself physically. She is very aggressive and harms herself and others on a regular basis. She has poor table manners and eats her food very fast. She refuses to dress when someone is constantly pressuring her and wastes time until someone helps her wear her clothes.

At school, she shies away from interactions with other students and remains withdrawn and 'in her own world'. Her teachers describe her as 'noncompliant', 'lazy', and 'impatient'. Due to her dyslexia, she is unable to recognize words properly and her spelling is poor. Her main stumbling stones are reading and comprehension. She is unable to understand phonological sounds and hence, has trouble remembering the pronunciation of words or sequence of letters. She is often found not to pay attention in class and gets easily distracted during lessons or classwork. A piece of her writing often shows reversals in letters and numbers and confusion of letters such as 'm' and 'w', and 'b' and 'd'. Her handwriting is clumsy and untidy and it requires a keen eye to understand the words.

Management plan

Strategies to tackle autism

1. Lack of flexibility

Due to her autism, Danielle often requires a fixed routine such as regular greetings and fixed instructions. Any change in her regular routine makes her anxious and impedes her learning. In this scenario, some strategies that would help her include same simple instructions every day, regular drills for greetings and classwork, and fixed seating plans. She should be kept away from distracting sounds such as the hum of a computer or a ticking clock. However, it is important to occasionally introduce some small changes to the routine to help her understand that changes are okay and things need not stop due to a small 'error' (Wire, 2005).

This obsession with routine can be used positively to teach her as she loves familiarity and revisiting familiar phrases, lessons, games, numbers and lists. This can be used to build a database of knowledge which can be tapped for teaching Danielle and building an environment of discipline where she feels comfortable and safe, and thus more open to learning new things (Autism speaks, 2008).

2. Social interactions

A student with autism usually shies away from social interactions and hence, has fewer opportunities to learn as compared to other students. Pairing up Danielle with another student in her class and giving tasks that can be done comfortably in pairs will give her the chance to interact with another person and learn together (Willis, 2009).

Pairing should be done with a student who is mature and can be patient and gentle with Danielle. Students who are popular and/or high scorers should be avoided as they can frighten her and affect learning. Instructions should be given slowly and clearly directly to Danielle as she only understands voice commands and multiple instructions should be avoided. Due to her

dyslexia, activities that might help Danielle learn would involve actions rather than text and these could include role-play, drawing and painting (Wire, 2005).

Initially, Danielle might not be comfortable speaking to her partner and might speak too fast or too loud. The inappropriateness of volume could be explained to Danielle by recording a segment of her conversation and playing it back to her. If she is uncomfortable with her voice being recorded, entire classes can be recorded so that it becomes a natural part of her classes (Wire, 2005).

3. Workload

Danielle should be given an achievable workload so that she can complete her tasks without pressure. She should also have some level of control in her tasks such as she can choose which tasks to complete first and what reward she would like upon successful completion of her assignments. The tasks should be direct, clear and straightforward, and the end of the assignment should be defined by a particular activity or game. The assignments should be numbered and the completed assignments can be placed in a separate file, so that Danielle can get a sense of how much has been completed and how many tasks are pending. Using a clock will help her track the progress of her task in relation to time elapsed (Larkey, 2006).

4. Design of tasks

Danielle's tasks should be designed keeping her strengths in mind. This can be identified by observation and interview, and this will help her work with familiarity and minimum stress. Similar types of tasks should be avoided as this might create boredom and detachment over a long period of time. Also, this will not give her a broader exposure and encourage her to discover

a wider skill-set. Tasks should be designed creatively keeping her strengths and limitations in mind, and there can be different types of tasks for the same lesson, which help her learn and retain the main concepts (Denning and Moody, 2013).

5. Giving instructions and rewards

Instructions should be direct and assertive, rather than vague and abstract. For example, if Danielle needs to draw a circle for a task, the correct instruction would be “Draw a circle” rather than “Draw a circle and not a square”, as she might get confused whether she needs to draw a circle or a square. It is always better to use visual aids and figures to help her understand what needs to be done as autistic children tend to think in pictures rather than words. Visual material will prove more impactful than plain text (Larkey, 2006).

Rewards are best given based on what she finds motivating and exciting. In order to find out what she desires at the end of an assignment, it is better to make a list of rewards and allow her to pick. This will give insights into ways to teach her and build her self-confidence. Rewards should be chosen in a way that will help her feel a sense of accomplishment and obtain immediate feedback on its effectiveness. They should be changed frequently so that Danielle retains her interest and excitement in completing her tasks and waiting for her reward (HANDS in autism, n.d.).

6. Schedules

As mentioned earlier, autistic students love rigidity in their routine, and well-prepared and strictly followed schedules will present a comfortable environment for Danielle to learn. Some tools that can be used to help her prepare schedules include compics, boardmakers, remnants from previous activities, photographs, comic strip illustrations, posters, blackboards,

diaries, photo albums, business card holders, and books. These can also be used as behavior management tools where Danielle will be able to see both activities she labels as 'boring' and those she labels as 'exciting'. Especially as Danielle faces problems with writing, this can be a creative means to encourage her to use text to organize her work and write about her day's activities. In case, Danielle is not comfortable writing her schedules, she can also cut words and paste them in her records or use pictures. They can also be used to teach days of the week, months of the year, numbers and time (The National Autistic Society, 2013).

Strategies to tackle dyslexia

1. Changes in assessment criteria

Like most students with dyslexia, Danielle finds it quite difficult to write letters and numbers, write paragraphs, spell, work in highly noisy environments, and read at a quick pace. Also, her handwriting is illegible and she finds it difficult to hold the pencil in her hand and write. Hence, it would help her if her assessment criteria were more suitable to her needs such as underlining instead of writing, multiple choice questions and answers, sorting and marking. If sentences need to be written, Danielle can be given extra space on her worksheets or an individual small blackboard for writing her answers (Scottish Qualifications Authority, 2011).

2. Use of technology

Danielle would benefit from the use of a graphic organizer, which would allow her to organize her lessons into an easy-to-understand visual format. One method of organization that she can follow is as follows: she can list the topic of the lesson on the first line, divide the entire lesson into a few major headings in the second line, divide all the available information based on the headings and also develop appropriate sub-headings if required. This will help her get the

main ideas of a lesson by just glancing at this flowchart. Creating this flowchart will also help her retain the important concepts in her mind for a long time (Brock et al., 2007).

Danielle can also use a digital calendar to record her due dates for tasks and assignments, prepare to-do lists for school activities, record dates for tests and exams, and prepare schedules for completing her assignments. This will help her be more organized with respect to her classwork and plan out her assignments with regularity and punctuality. Instructional aids such as letter and number strips can be provided to Danielle to help write properly. Other technological solutions, especially for mathematics, include calculators, counters and number lines (IDA, 2013).

3. Special considerations

There are certain considerations, if made by her teachers at school, can greatly help Danielle learn effectively and build a positive self-image. She can be given extra time to complete her classwork and homework, have help with taking down notes or be given a copy of notes, and be given modified tasks in order to make it easier for her to complete them. Danielle's teachers may also provide her with books or text on tape so that she can listen and grasp the information. Written directions may be in the form of points or important words may be underlined so that she can easily get the main ideas. Small and simple tasks may be given to her at a time so that she can feel a sense of accomplishment after completing each task. Reading guides may be prepared for her so that she can get the main concept of the lesson easily. She can turn her lined notebooks so that she can have vertical columns for doing math problems which will help her write numbers within the lines. Worksheets can be arranged in a hierarchical order so that the easiest problems are present at the top of the sheet. This will help build her self-esteem as she quickly completes the first few tasks with ease (IDA, 2013).

Summary of management plan for Danielle

- Create a daily fixed routine for Danielle and stick by it
- Ensure that her environment is free of distractions and background noises
- Use familiar strategies and concepts to teach her new things
- Pair her up with a mature patient student in her class and give them tasks to complete together
- Carefully design her assignments so that she may be able to complete them with ease and attain a sense of accomplishment
- Provide clear, direct, simple and visual (if possible) instructions
- Give rewards that will be meaningful to her and make her look forward to completing the next assignment
- Help Danielle make schedules of her activities using either words or pictures and follow them regularly
- Assessment in exams can be in the form of multiple choice questions, underlining or marking
- Provide technological and instructional aids such as digital calendars and graphic organizers and help Danielle use them appropriately
- Provide audio-visual material as opposed to text for learning purposes

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