

Let's Talk About...

Spina Bifida and Educational Programs

School can be a challenge for children with spina bifida because of learning problems due to having spina bifida. Therefore, it is important for you and your student's parents to create a positive learning environment. Some suggestions for doing this are explained below.

How can I help my student improve his seeing, moving, and understanding skills?

Sometimes, children with spina bifida struggle with seeing objects and understanding the spatial relationships between them (visuospatial skill). An example of this would be putting a puzzle together or seeing the differences between shapes. They may also struggle with seeing an object and coordinating a movement, such as copying instructions from the blackboard (visuomotor skill). As a teacher, you can help your student work around these difficulties in the following ways:

- Reduce the amount of written work required:
 - Allow your student to write in a workbook.
 - Do not require him to copy notes or problems.
 - Have another student copy notes using no carbon-required paper. Then give the copy to your student.
 - Allow your student to tell someone his answers or to write answers using incomplete sentences.
 - Emphasize readable handwriting over neat handwriting.

These adjustments will help your student with spina bifida spend about the same amount of time on assignments as the other students.

- Increase or eliminate time limits on tests.
- Teach the child to use computers and calculators.

How can I improve my student's reading and verbal understanding?

- Keep verbal explanations and instructions brief. Make sure your student understands all instructions.
- Use learning materials that improve reading understanding. Your student should use the following questions to guide their reading:
 - Who are the main characters?
 - What is happening (the plot of the story, the sequence of events)?
 - Where does the story occur (place)?
 - When does the story occur (year, day, season, length of time)?
 - Why are the characters doing what they are doing (reasons)?
 - How are the characters doing what they are doing (tools, transportation, technology)?
- Teach your student to look at subject headings, underlined words, italicized words, and bolded words when reading textbooks.

How can I help my student to pay attention?

- If the student struggles with paying attention, refer him to the school psychologist for further evaluation.
- With the assistance of the school psychologist, set up an attention improvement program.
- Break tasks into small parts and give the student one part at a time.
- Provide a work place that is free of distractions.
- Establish a secret signal that reminds the student to get back to task, e.g., a tap on the shoulder.

How can I help improve my student's memory skills?

- Have the school psychologist formally evaluate his memory skills.
- If your student qualifies for speech/language therapy, have the school's speech therapist teach him methods to improve memory.
- Use open book tests when appropriate.
- Help the student remember important tasks by using alarms or timers.

How can I help my student with organizational skills?

- Establish Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals to improve organizational skills
- Teach your student how to organize belongings. Then prompt him to keep organized until it becomes a habit.
- Help your student set daily and weekly routines for tasks such as putting his book bag away in the same place every day.
- Provide visual schedules and checklists to help your student keep track of various tasks.
- Have secondary students take a study skills class that teaches skills such as organizing, test taking, note taking, and outlining.
- If needed, have secondary students take a supervised study class, where a teacher or teacher's aide assists the student with homework.
- Have a point person such as a counselor or resource teacher designated to monitor the student's performance across mainstream classes. Ensure that adjustments in the classroom and class work have been made for your student, as needed.

How can I help my student develop good problem-solving and reasoning skills?

- Encourage your student to solve problems by himself. Teach him the following steps to solve a problem:
 - Identify the problem
 - List all possible solutions
 - List possible consequences to the possible solutions
 - Choose the best strategy to solve the problem
- Form cooperative learning groups so your student learns to work with other children to solve problems.

How can I help my student develop good social skills?

- Enroll him in a social skills training group at the school.
- Give him feedback on inappropriate social behaviors and provide alternative positive behaviors.
- Reinforce appropriate social behaviors.