

A–Z of teaching young learners: Special needs

What and why?

All children are 'special', of course, and every child has needs which teachers need to take into account. The phrase special needs, however, is normally used to refer to children who have particular teaching/learning needs, most commonly children who are disadvantaged in 'normal' classroom procedures. In many cases, children with special needs are identified by the school system and extra support is provided. Often, however, the difficulties that a child suffers may go unnoticed until it is too late. These may include partial deafness, limited vision, reading difficulties, restlessness, hyperactivity, and so on. English teachers are not normally qualified to make judgements about the special needs of a child, and should resist making statements about their capabilities. In common with other teachers, however, an English teacher can have a role in identifying a child who is in need of extra help or attention.

Practical ideas

- Try to view each child in your class as an individual. Take time to focus specifically on each child for brief periods and notice what difficulties they appear to be having.
- If a child is having problems keeping up or understanding, try to find out why. Talk to the child and see if he or she has problems hearing or seeing the board. Ask if he or she would like to move nearer the front of the class, or away from sources of noise such as a noisy corridor or fan.
- Children who are disruptive in the classroom or who create other discipline problems may be in need of some extra attention and support. Sometimes, for example, they may misbehave because they are avoiding problems with reading or writing.
- If you do identify a child who you think is in need of extra help, try to talk to a specialist and hear their opinion. You may also talk to the parents. This needs to be done very sensitively, however, to avoid causing any extra anxiety.
- Finally, it is important not to lay the blame for failure on the child. Many children do need extra help, but equally, many come to be labelled 'special needs children' because of failings in the classroom.