

# Young people with additional needs

Young people can be classified as having additional needs for a huge variety of reasons. It is beyond the scope of this pack to go into each need in detail. This section will look more closely at three conditions most commonly linked with anxiety-based school avoidance (ABSA).

- Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC).
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).
- General Learning Disorders (GLD) and Specific Learning Disorders (Dyslexia, Dyscalculia).



## Practical tips for practitioners

It is crucially important that practitioners working with a young person with an additional need have a clear understanding of the nature of that condition. All adults working with these young people should try to access training where possible or complete the necessary reading and research in order to provide appropriate support.

Where possible, try to link in with parents/guardians, SEN teachers, SNAs and other school personnel that may already have Support Plans or other supports already in place. It can be extremely difficult for a young person to discuss their need and/or diagnosis. There is a possibility they may never have discussed it with anyone, or even be fully aware of the nature of their need. It is important that the practitioner has built a trusting relationship with the young person before completing the worksheets provided in this section. Exploring this issue with a young person who is not ready could cause significant distress or lead them to disengage further. It is advisable to discuss with parents/guardians and other professionals to decide who is best placed to complete this work.

It may be that in the course of your work with a young person, you begin to query if they have an undiagnosed condition. In this case, it is advisable to share your concerns with parents/guardians and/or school and suggest a referral for the young person to an assessment.



# Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC)



## Practical tips for practitioners

It is well documented that anxiety and poor stress management are common in young people with ASC and that anxiety may worsen during adolescence, as young people face increasingly complex social interactions and often become more aware of their differences and interpersonal difficulties. Consequently, autistic young people can find school exhausting as they may be expending large amounts of cognitive energy managing this social experience and can become overloaded and increasingly anxious.

Given the increased risk of a child with ASC experiencing high levels of anxiety that may lead to school avoidance, it is essential that there is early attention and intervention given to developing their social skills, emotional literacy, resilience and ability to self-regulate.

## How might a diagnosis of ASC impact the young person's relationship with school and their education?

Young autistic people may:

- Lack the complex social skills that come naturally to others and therefore struggle to make friends and experience bullying.
- Have difficulty coping with the curriculum as they may experience difficulty processing information and understanding questions and text.
- Struggle to cope with the demands of a school timetable due to organisation and prioritising difficulties.
- Find school exhausting and overwhelming as they are spending huge amounts of cognitive energy 'masking' or attempting to hide their autistic traits.
- Have sensory processing differences making aspects of the school environment like noises, smells and lighting distracting or triggering.
- Strive for perfection in their work and see anything less as failure.
- Get into trouble with staff and students for being unintentionally rude.
- Find sudden changes in routine or transitions difficult (like moving classes or changing teachers).
- Find that unstructured time, like breaks and lunchtime, cause anxiety.

# What can you do as a practitioner?

## Tune in

- If you have not done so already, try to access training or do the necessary reading or research around the young person's diagnosis so that you have a solid understanding of their challenges and needs. Maintain a strengths-based approach when working with the young person.
- Anxiety levels can be reduced by ensuring all adults working with the young person have an understanding of ASC and adopt general good practice strategies that are individualised to the young person's specific needs i.e. visual supports, structure, managing change and generally increasing the certainty of the school day.
- Professionals need to analyse and understand the specific needs and strengths of the young person and design an individualised programme to address school avoidance. (See Pupil Progression Tool - Autism Education Trust (AET 2019) in Resources).
- Try to build up a clear picture of exactly what elements of attending school are increasing their anxiety in order that best endeavours can be made to alleviate the anxiety. (See Worksheet 1).
- Frequent monitoring and assessment of the student's emotional state, view and reactions can be very useful for anticipating and managing difficulties. By understanding the student's own inner world, thoughts and misconceptions, fears (irrational or not) and general emotional state, schools are in a better position to act upon the factors preventing the young person from attending school.
- Remember that anxiety-based school avoidance is rooted in anxiety. If you have not already done so, please read Section 2 and complete the worksheets in Section 3 on Anxiety before proceeding with the worksheets below.

## Communication



### Practical tips for practitioners

Collaborative work and good communication with SEN teachers, SNAs and other members of school staff, parents and the young person is crucially important. If possible, try to link in with other key adults to see what has worked, or not, in the past.

## “Communication”

### **Worksheet: Identify your school triggers (ASC-specific)**

- See Appendix A, Worksheet 10.
- This worksheet can be used to explore the practical and emotional barriers to attending school the young person may be facing.
- As you progress through the checklist, you can explore topics in more detail, where appropriate.

### **Worksheet: What do you like about school?**

- See Appendix A, Worksheet 11.
- This worksheet can be useful when drawing up a Return to School Plan with the student. It is a checklist style worksheet, used to identify the positives of school.

### **Worksheet: Things I would like people in school to know**

- See Appendix A, Worksheet 12.
- This worksheet can be used to allow the student to express and identify some difficulties they may be having and propose solutions.
- With consent from the student, this can be shared with the school or used to inform a Return to School Plan.

### **Worksheet: What does my learning difficulty mean to me?**

- See Appendix A, Worksheet 13.
- This worksheet is designed to explore the young person's experience of their additional need/diagnosis. It is important to ensure this work completed by the young person with a trusted adult. The student may need significant empathy, validation and support in completing this work as it is a very sensitive topic. It is also important to discuss your intention to complete this work with parents/guardians to gauge what understanding the young person has of their additional need.





## Practical tips for practitioners

- Try to anticipate problems and prepare the student for challenges. Social Stories can be easily written in advance to prepare for transitions or changes to routine. Social stories can also be used to validate emotional experiences, explore worries or concerns and present potential solutions or coping strategies. (See 'How to Write Social Stories with Visual supports in resources section)
- Sharing resources such as social stories and timetables with parents and mirroring strategies at home can be really beneficial.
- Acknowledge, empathise with and validate the struggles the young person may be experiencing.
- The adoption of simple reward schemes for attendance or to recognise and reinforce days well spent or positives of attending school can be really impactful.
- Teaching relaxation skills the student can call upon quickly when anxious. These can include specific bodily relaxation protocols, breathing exercises, imagery, Mindfulness or Yoga techniques or other - there are many accessible programmes on the web.

## Recommended resources

- **Pupil Progression Tool - Autism Education Trust (AET 2019):**  
<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/shop/pf-shop/>
- **How to write a social story with visual supports:** <https://www.yourtherapysource.com/blog1/2017/11/18/write-social-story-visual-supports/>
- **Excellent Resource from Middletown Autism on 'Autism and School Refusal'**  
<https://vle.middletownautism.com/>
- **Resource to share with parents:**  
<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/education/attendance-problems/parents>

# Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)



## Practical tips for practitioners

It's common for young people diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) to struggle with anxiety, whether it's a few symptoms or a full-blown disorder. According to the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) in the United States, most recently conducted in 2016, 3 out of 10 children with ADHD also have an anxiety disorder<sup>1</sup>.

Many ADHD symptoms can feel incompatible with the structured and controlled setting of a school and consequently students with ADHD (and ADD) often struggle in school and may try to avoid attending.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/adhd/data.html>

## How might a diagnosis of ADHD impact the young person's relationship with school and their education?

- Students with ADHD present with behaviours that can be very disruptive to classroom activities including interrupting, blurting out, fidgeting, and forgetfulness. Consistent correction can lead to low self-esteem and increased stress.
- ADHD can impact a student's working memory, time-management skills, and organisational skills. As a result, completing long and short-term tasks and following daily school routines can feel significantly more difficult.
- If the student begins to fall behind academically, this can lead to chronic stress and/or disengagement.
- Sleep disturbances occur in more than half of young people with ADHD which can impact their engagement in class.
- Young people with ADHD can struggle with emotional regulation and become easily flooded with unmanageable emotions (positive or negative). This may lead to them being rejected by their peers and being at a higher risk of being excluded and/or bullied.
- Due to the behaviours described above, students with ADHD can be labelled as 'disruptive' with challenging behaviour, which can impact their self-esteem and motivation to attend school.



# What can you do as a practitioner?

## Tune in

- If you haven't done so already, try to access training or do the necessary reading or research around the young person's diagnosis so that you have a solid understand of their challenges and needs. Maintain a strengths-based approach when working with the student.
- If there are indications that the young person is at risk of school avoidance, it will be important to build up a clear picture of exactly what elements of attending school are increasing their anxiety in order that best endeavours can be made to alleviate the anxiety. If you haven't already done so, please read Section 2 on Anxiety before proceeding and complete the activities in Section 3.
- The young person may be very resistant to attending school and respond defensively or angrily when you begin to explore the issue. It is important to remember that anxiety can often present as anger in young people. Use this opportunity to validate and empathise with what the young person is feeling and tune into the feelings that may live under surface emotions.



## Practical tips for practitioners

- Acknowledge, empathise with and validate the struggles your student may be experiencing.
- Try to identify and understand the stressors that cause the most anxiety for the student. This helps to predict anxiety-inducing situations and manage symptoms as they arise (see Sections 2 and 3).
- If necessary, arrange a buddy system with a classmate to assist the young person with transitions, organisation and time management.
- Complete lessons on sleep hygiene and link with home where necessary.
- Allow the young person to take rest breaks where possible.

## Communication

- Read and complete appropriate worksheets from Section 2 before proceeding.
- Complete worksheets 8, 9 and 10 from Section 3.



## Practical tips for practitioners

Young people with ADHD often find it difficult to maintain focus and attention for long periods. It may help to:

- Complete worksheets over a number of shorter, 15-20 minutes blocks instead of all at once.
- Complete worksheets orally while out on a walk
- Allow the young person to complete small sections independently in class or at home and then discuss later.
- Adapt worksheets to suit the ability of the student.

## “Communication”

### **Worksheet: What does my learning difficulty mean to me?**

- See Appendix A, Worksheet 13.
- This worksheet is designed to explore the young person’s experience of their additional need/diagnosis. It is important to ensure this work completed by the young person with a trusted adult. The student may need significant empathy, validation and support in completing this work as it is a very sensitive topic. It is also important to discuss your intention to complete this work with parents/carers to gauge what understanding the young person has of their additional need.

### **Worksheet: Sleep hygiene**

- <https://www.therapistaid.com/worksheets/sleep-hygiene-handout.pdf>
- Sleep hygiene information hand out for young person.

### **Worksheet: Sleep diary**

- <https://www.therapistaid.com/worksheets/sleep-diary.pdf>
- If sleep difficulties are an issue for the young person, this worksheet can be used to enable the student to log and analyse their sleeping behaviour and identify areas to work on improving.



## Practical tips for practitioners

- Analyse and identify the specific needs and strengths of the child and design an individualised programme to address their school avoidance patterns.
- Emphasis and celebrate multiple intelligences (See Resources: Gardner's Theory of Multiple intelligences) Try to avoid placing disproportionate value on more academic and cognitive activities.
- Students with additional need to be given regular opportunities to display mastery and experience success, which should be publicly acknowledged and celebrated.
- Reward and praise effort and personal improvement over high results and perfection. Create a safe environment where it is ok for the young person to make mistakes.
- It's important to help the young person to recognize and manage stress, the skills of honest self-appraisal, and the ability to learn from and correct mistakes.

## Recommended resources

- <https://adhdireland.ie/>
- <https://www.psycom.net/adhd-children-anxiety>
- [https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Teaching-and-Managing-Students\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Teaching-and-Managing-Students_FINAL.pdf)



# General Learning Disorders (GLD) and Specific Learning Disorders (Dyslexia, dyscalculia etc.)



## Practical tips for practitioners

Young people who are diagnosed (or sometimes undiagnosed) with specific or general learning disorders are also at increased risk of school avoidance. They may experience anxiety in relation to class performance or being asked to engage in class activities such as reading aloud, group projects or presentations. If they perceive they are under-achieving, this can affect their self-esteem and confidence. They may experience exclusion or bullying by other students.

There are two main types of learning disorder:

- A general learning disorder (GLD) can range from borderline mild, mild, moderate, to severe/profound. Children with general learning disabilities find it more difficult to learn, understand and do things than other children of the same age.
- A specific learning disorder (SLD) is defined as ‘impairments in specific aspects of reading, writing and arithmetical notation, the primary cause of which is not attributable to assessed ability being below the average range, to defective sight or hearing, emotional factors, a physical condition or to any extrinsic adverse circumstances’. This includes dyslexia and dyscalculia.

## How might a diagnosis of a learning disorder impact the young person’s relationship with school and their education?

- A student with a GLD may struggle with working memory, processing, time-management skills, and organizational skills. They may become tired easily and struggle to maintain concentration for long periods.
- A student with an SLD like dyslexia is vulnerable to experiencing stress and anxiety, as their academic progress may be significantly slower than their peers despite having a similar IQ and understanding of class content.
- Students with learning disorders often do not fully understand the nature of their learning disability, and as a result, tend to blame themselves for their own difficulties. This can impact self-esteem and general interest in school.
- Students with learning disorders adopt a strategy of avoiding making public mistakes (and the inevitable negative reactions) by disengaging with classroom activities. This can often lead to school avoidance.

# General Learning Disorders (GLD) and Specific Learning Disorders (Dyslexia, dyscalculia etc.)

## How might a diagnosis of a learning disorder impact the young person's relationship with school and their education?

- Some students with learning disorders engage in masking their difficulties and will go to huge efforts to hide their struggles from other students. This can present as being the 'class clown', misbehaviour, or copying others' work, which can lead to being repeatedly reprimanded for behaviour. This can result in further disengagement from school.
- Other students with learning disorders may exhibit traits of perfectionism. They may expend huge extra effort trying to keep up with the class, which can have a big impact on their self-esteem and overall energy levels.
- Students with learning disorders may also experience significant test and exam anxiety.

## Tune in

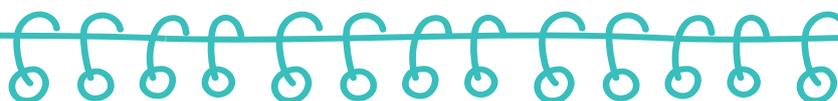
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# What can you do as a practitioner?

## Communication

- Read and complete appropriate worksheets from Section 2 before proceeding.
- Complete worksheets 8, 9 and 10 from Section 3.



### Practical tips for practitioners

Young people with GLD and SLD may find it difficult to complete written work. It may help to:

- Complete worksheets over a number of shorter, 15-20 minutes blocks instead of all at once.
- Complete worksheets orally and write the answer as the student speaks.
- Adapt worksheets to suit the ability of the student.

## Communication

### Worksheet: Things I would like people in school to know

- See Appendix A, Worksheet 12.
- This worksheet can be used to allow the student to express and identify some difficulties they may be having and propose solutions.
- With consent from the student, this can be shared with the school or used to inform a Return to School Plan.

### Worksheet: What does my learning difficulty mean to me?

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## Practical tips for practitioners

- Analyse and identify the specific needs and strengths of the young person and design an individualised programme to address their school avoidance patterns.
- Emphasise and celebrate multiple intelligences (See Resources: Gardner's Theory of Multiple intelligences) Try to avoid placing disproportionate value on more academic and cognitive activities.
- Students with learning disorders need to be given regular opportunities to display mastery and experience success, which should be publicly acknowledged and celebrated.
- Reward and praise effort and personal improvement over high results and perfection. Create a safe environment where it is ok for the young person to make mistakes.
- It's important to help the young person to recognize and manage stress, the skills of honest self-appraisal, and the ability to learn from and correct mistakes.

### Recommended resources

- <https://www.sess.ie/categories/specific-learning-disabilities>
- <https://www.sess.ie/categories/general-learning-disabilities>
- <https://dyslexiaida.org/the-dyslexia-stress-anxiety-connection/>
- <https://www.simplypsychology.org/multiple-intelligences.html>
- <https://childmind.org/article/how-to-help-kids-talk-about-learning-disabilities/>



# Worksheet 10:

## Identify your school triggers

Name ..... Date .....

Directions: Read each item and answer honestly. Take your time as you complete this. Ask for help if you don't understand an item. Rate each item from 1 - 5.

<b>1 =</b>	Does not bother me at all. I'm fine!	
<b>2 =</b>	Makes me feel a little uncomfortable	
<b>3 =</b>	Makes me feel stressed and worried	
<b>4 =</b>	I am really upset and unhappy	
<b>5 =</b>	I'm going to explode!	

How do I feel when...

**1 2 3 4 5**

	1	2	3	4	5
A teacher gives me feedback / constructive criticism					
Someone or something interrupts me while I am working					
A teacher tells me to correct a mistake					
When I don't understand what someone is saying to me					
When I disagree with classmate					
When a classmate asks for help					
Homework					
When a teacher tells me to do something					
Group work with classmates					
Meeting new people					
When one of my ideas is not included in a project / activity					
When someone tries to talk to me, and I don't want to talk to them					

# Worksheet 10:

## Identify your school triggers

How do I feel when...

1 2 3 4 5

When I am excluded from an activity or conversation					
Getting a lower grade on a test or assignment					
When someone points out a mistake I made					
Wearing specific clothing (i.e. long pants, coat, shirt, PE gear)					
Getting to school on time					
Changing classes					
Greeting people					
Taking tests					
When a teacher tells me no					
Big projects					
Specific noises (i.e. beeping, humming)					
Certain smells (examples: perfumes, foods)					
When my daily routine is changed					
Loud places					
School bells or loudspeaker announcements					
Fire drills					
When I have to do something new or different					
When I am late to school					
When a classmate disagrees with me					
Hearing other people's music /radio					
When others touch me (i.e. handshake, pat on back)					
Large crowds					

# Worksheet 10:

## Identify your school triggers

How do I feel when...

**1 2 3 4 5**

When I have to wait for something					
Teasing by others					
Crowded hallways					
Peer pressure					
Bright lighting					
When I have to do something in a different way from usual					
Big classrooms					
When I don't understand a certain idea or concept					
When I don't finish something on time					
Getting wet (i.e. hands, shoes)					
Field trips or school tours					
When someone talks to me about something that I am not interested in					
Certain textures (examples: in clothing, paint, glue, chalk, cookery, art materials).					
Changes in noise level					
Deadlines, time pressures					
Sitting at a desk for long periods of time					
Reading assignments					
When other people are talking near me					
Small spaces (i.e. cubicles)					
Asking for help					
When I am confused about a task / activity					

# Worksheet 11:

## Identify your school triggers

How do I feel when...

1 2 3 4 5

Exams and tests					
When I have to follow specific instructions					
Physical activity (i.e. in health class or P.E.)					
Large spaces (i.e. auditoriums, gyms, conference rooms)					
When I have to organize my things					

Now that you have finished rating these items, identify your **BIG TRIGGERS**. These are items that you scored as a “5” (or perhaps even a “4”). Write those down below and be as specific as you can. For example, if certain noises make you want to “explode,” describe the specific noise that makes you feel this way.

My TOP FIVE “5’s” are:

- 1 .....
- 2 .....
- 3 .....
- 4 .....
- 5 .....

**Ref:** (Adapted for Irish Students from worksheet on [www.do2learn.com](http://www.do2learn.com))

<https://do2learn.com/activities/SocialSkills/Stress/StressTriggers.html>

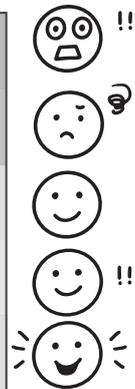
# Worksheet 11:

## What do you like about school?

Name ..... Date .....

Directions: Read each item and answer honestly. Take your time as you complete this. Ask for help if you don't understand an item. Rate each item from 1 – 5.

<b>1 =</b>	<b>I have no interest or don't like this.</b>
<b>2 =</b>	<b>It's ok. I don't mind it.</b>
<b>3 =</b>	<b>I enjoy this.</b>
<b>4 =</b>	<b>I really like this.</b>
<b>5 =</b>	<b>This is one of my favourite things about school! I love it!</b>



How do I feel when...

**1 2 3 4 5**

	1	2	3	4	5
Exams and tests					
A teacher gives me positive feedback or praise					
Spending time with other students					
PE or sports activities					
A teacher asks me to do a job					
Talking about what I am interested in					
Working in pairs with other students					
Art					
Homework					
Break time					
Group work with classmates					
Meeting or talking to my friends					
Working on a project / activity					

# Worksheet 11:

What do you like about school?

1 2 3 4 5

Music					
Time alone					
Doing well in exams or tests					
The routine of school e.g. timetable, same every week					
Extracurricular activities					
Listening to music					
Changing classes					
Learning about new stuff					
History					
Geography					
Swimming					
Woodwork or other practical subjects					
Specific noises (i.e. beeping, humming)					
Certain smells (examples: perfumes, foods)					
Cooking					
A break from home					
Loud places					
Quiet places					
Working on computers or devices					
When I have to do something new or different					
Eating lunch					
Getting the bus					
Taking breaks					

# Worksheet 11:

## What do you like about school?

1 2 3 4 5

Certain rooms or special places					
Field trips or school tours					
When someone talks to me about something that I am interested in					
Certain textures (examples: in clothing, paint, glue, chalk, cookery, art materials).					
Science class					
Drama					
Assembly					
Learning new skills					
Get to develop my talents and practice my hobbies					
Something to do					
Other school staff					

Now that you have finished rating these items, identify your favourite things. These are items that you scored as a “5” (or perhaps even a “4”). Write those down below and be as specific as you can. For example, if certain subjects are your favourite subjects, try to be specific about why.

My TOP FIVE “5’s” are:

- 1 .....
- 2 .....
- 3 .....
- 4 .....
- 5 .....

# Worksheet 12:

## Things I would like people in school to know

I find it hard to learn when:

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.....

.....

.....

It helps me to learn when:

.....

.....

.....

.....

It makes me not want to go to school when:

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# Worksheet 12:

Things I would like people in school to know

It would help me attend school if:

.....

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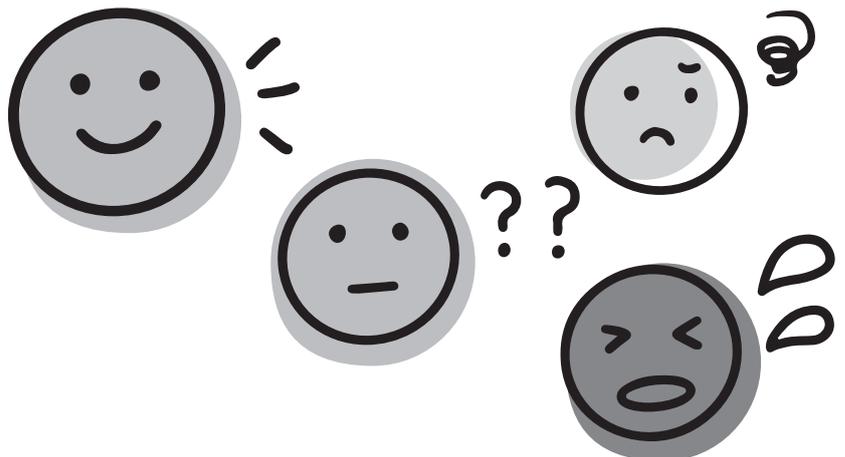
.....

Any other things I would like school to know:

.....

.....

.....



# Worksheet 13:

## What does my learning difficulty mean to me?

Having a learning difficulty does not mean that you cannot learn. It means that you learn in a different way. Nobody is brilliant at everything, and you have strengths, talents and skills just like everyone else. Write a few of the things you are really good at in the spaces below.

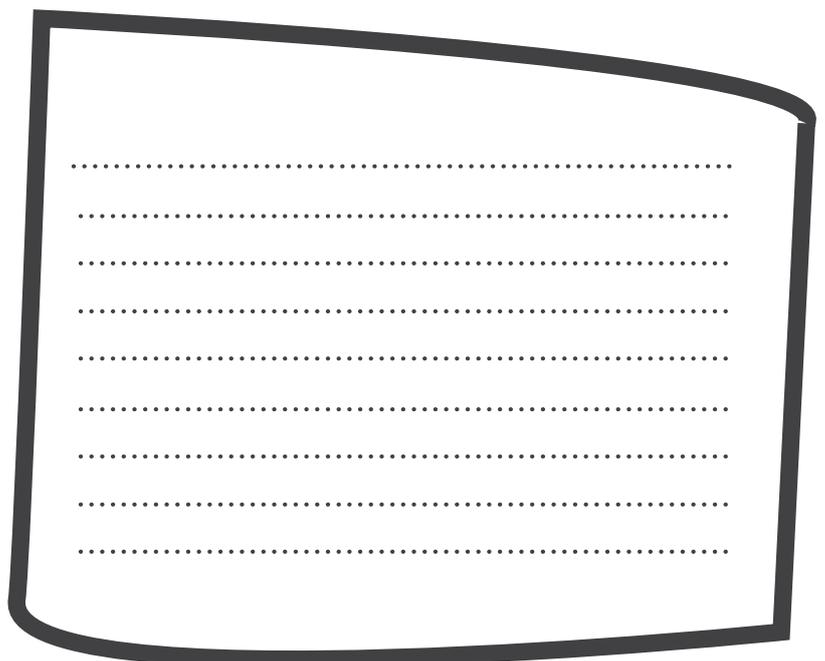


Six rounded rectangular boxes arranged in two rows of three, intended for writing strengths and talents. The top row contains three light grey boxes, and the bottom row contains three medium grey boxes.

What do you know about your additional need/diagnosis?

What information to you has about it?

How do you make sense of it in your own mind?



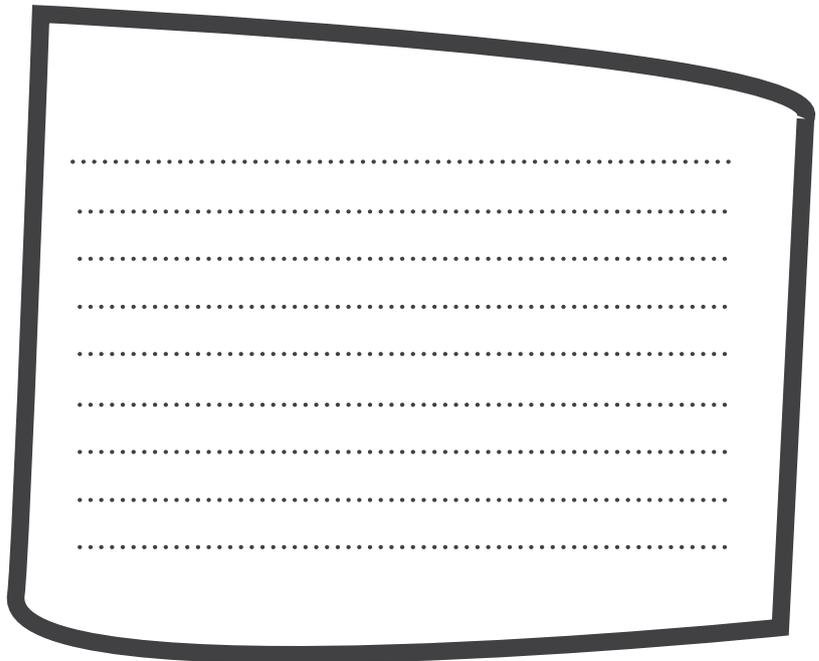
A large writing area with a thick black border and horizontal dotted lines for writing.

# Worksheet 13:

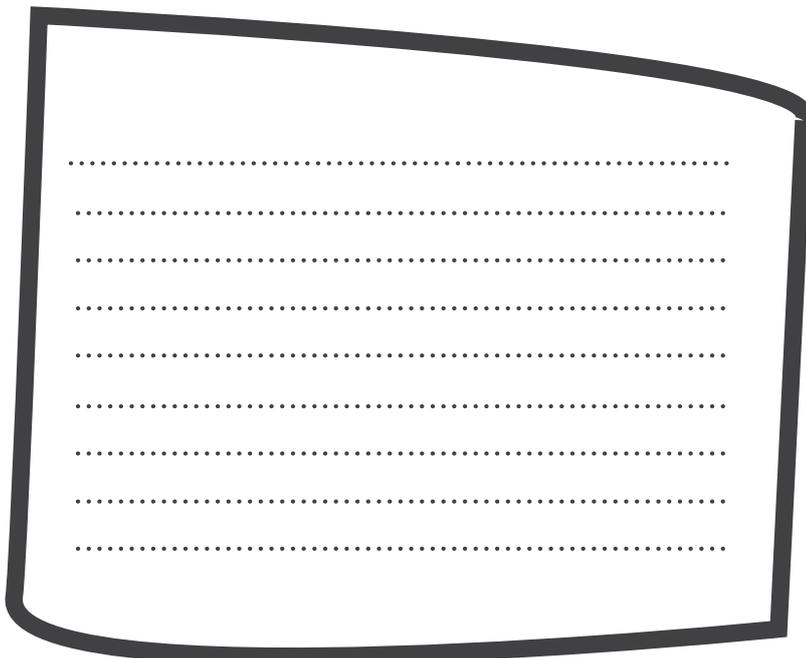
## What does my learning difficulty mean to me?

How does your additional need/diagnosis impact you day to day?

What feels harder for you?



What do people not understand about you?



What would you like people to understand?