

# An introduction to Developmental Coordination Disorder



School resources

For most people, getting dressed, walking up a staircase, or using cutlery to eat are all actions that are performed so automatically and easily that they require very little thought. People with Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), however, have difficulties in movement and coordination (also known as motor skills) that begin in early childhood and persist through life. It takes them longer to acquire the motor skills needed for actions involving movement or coordination of the body, and their ability to perform these actions required for daily living is significantly impaired. DCD is sometimes known as dyspraxia, but DCD is the official diagnostic term for the condition.

## What is Developmental Coordination Disorder?

People with DCD usually have difficulties with both gross and fine motor skills, impacting their daily lives in a wide range of ways. Motor skills describe the set of abilities we use when we perform or coordinate any physical movement. Whole-body motor actions (gross motor skills) include engaging the larger muscles in the body, allowing us to complete actions such as walking and running, throwing a ball, or riding a bike. This often involves balance and coordination between different parts of the body. Fine motor skills describe control of smaller movements, such as writing, buttoning clothes, or eating with a knife and fork.

DCD is usually diagnosed in childhood by a paediatrician and/or an occupational therapist, who make their assessment against a set of diagnostic criteria. The main symptom of DCD is significantly below average motor skills performance compared to people of the same age. A diagnosis of DCD will be given if these symptoms began in early childhood, represent a significant obstacle to the completion of daily living activities, and cannot be explained by an alternative diagnosis such as a neurological condition or intellectual disability<sup>1</sup>.

The prevalence of DCD among school-age children is estimated to be between 2% and 6%<sup>2</sup>, which means that there is likely to be at least one student in every classroom with DCD. It is also common for students with DCD to go undiagnosed due to the overlap with other developmental conditions, such as ADHD or autism, which are often identified first.

## Potential causes of DCD

There has not yet been enough research to determine what causes DCD, but there are likely to be many contributing factors rather than one identifiable cause. Some studies have shown that there may be genetic links<sup>3</sup> and children born prematurely or with a very low birth weight are more likely to have DCD compared with those born full term or within the normal weight range<sup>4</sup>. There is also evidence that there are differences in the brains of people with DCD compared to those without DCD, particularly in the areas of the brain associated with movement and sensory perception<sup>5</sup>[5].

## Strengths and challenges

As people with DCD are prone to lower self-esteem<sup>6</sup>, it is important to focus on where the individual's strengths lie and use these to minimise their difficulties. For example, someone with DCD might have much stronger verbal communication skills compared to their written skills. These students may benefit

from opportunities to demonstrate their strengths in different contexts at school, such as engaging in learning activities using oral communication. Supporting a student with DCD to identify and harness their own strengths and interests is a good way to provide them with the tools to thrive in school and beyond.

Due to their motor difficulties, there are physical aspects of school that might be challenging for students with DCD, such as sitting on a chair or a mat for prolonged periods of time. Activities that involve a sequence of movements, such as packing away their books and stationery at the end of a lesson, can also be challenging. Other examples might include getting changed for PE, which requires multiple motor steps (such as doing buttons, tying or untying shoelaces, and removing items of clothing).

Although not a part of the diagnostic criteria, [sensory processing differences](#) are common in DCD. Research suggests that more than 80% of people with DCD experience differences in the way they detect and manage sensory information. How this presents in the classroom will vary depending on the student's specific sensory processing differences, but some examples include finding noise uncomfortable, or the reverse, not responding to sound and missing verbal instructions. Read more about understanding the impact of sensory processing differences in the classroom [here](#).

People with DCD can struggle to understand where their body is in space and in relation to other objects. This is also known as spatial thinking, which refers to understanding the location, dimension, and properties of objects, and is strongly linked to motor skills. For this reason, activities such as puzzles or construction activities might be more challenging. People with DCD also have difficulty remembering and manipulating spatial information, also known as visual spatial working memory<sup>7</sup>. Visual spatial working memory involves the ability to remember shapes and colours, as well as their locations and movements, and is important in letter and number recognition. These difficulties are known to impact academic learning broadly, but particularly mathematics because it involves a lot of spatial thinking<sup>8</sup>.

## Supporting students with DCD at school

Students with DCD can find school challenging. Research has shown that students with DCD achieve significantly poorer educational outcomes compared to their peers<sup>9</sup>. Below are a few examples of specific challenges that students with DCD might face. There are currently very few evidence-based supports and interventions for students with DCD, but some ideas from practice that may be beneficial for some students with DCD are included. It is important to discuss the use of supports and interventions with the student and their caregivers prior to implementation. Often the student and their family will have valuable information about their strengths, needs, and approaches that have been successful in the past.

## Movement in and around the classroom

Classrooms can be challenging environments for students with DCD, with students having to navigate around various pieces of furniture, sit at particular tables or desks, and look back and forth between the teacher, a screen or whiteboard, and their peers. They also need to coordinate different items of stationery, text books, exercise books, and devices. Younger children may need to be supported to remove a jumper if they are hot, or may not realise that their nose is running and they need to get a tissue. There are some simple steps that teachers can take to significantly reduce the complexity of movements that students with DCD have to undertake:

- Ensuring that students with DCD are seated at desks or tables where they can look directly at the teacher or board without having to turn their heads or bodies.
- Some students with DCD will benefit from having the back legs of their chair slightly raised so that their pelvis is tilted.

- Ensure there is enough space around desks and chairs for students to move easily around the classroom.
- If sitting on the mat, allow the student to lean against a wall or some other firm structure so that they can more easily orientate their body in space.
- Store students' books, stationery, and other tools and materials at their desk so that they do not need to collect them and carry them across the room.

## Handwriting

Due to difficulties with fine motor skills, handwriting (and also drawing and other activities that require fine motor skills such as cutting and gluing) can be challenging and uncomfortable for students with DCD. This might mean that they are slower to complete learning activities that involve writing compared to their peers. There are a number of strategies teachers can use to support students with DCD:

- Offer wide-stemmed pencils or pens, or apply a grip to a writing tool to make writing easier.
- Use lined surfaces rather than blank paper.
- Have students write on a sloping board rather than on a flat surface.
- When teaching students how to form letter and number shapes, utilise an approach where, as much as possible, the student is not having to raise their pencil off the writing surface as they write. For children who are just learning how to write, it may be more appropriate to focus on mark making rather than specific letters (such as vertical lines, horizontal lines, circles, and so on, as these form the basis of letter forms).
- Provide additional time for activities or assignments that have a written component.
- If appropriate, allow students to complete an activity orally or utilising voice-to-text software.
- Allow students to utilise a device so that they can type rather than handwrite.

## Organisation and planning

Organisation and planning can be challenging for students with DCD, particularly when it involves movement. They may need support with planning a sequence of movements or activities, due to difficulties with visual spatial working memory. They may also find it difficult to follow complex or multi-component instructions, and also often find it difficult to start on a new task. Students with DCD may also need more processing time compared to other students in the class. They will also often struggle with remembering particular tasks or things they need to do, such as bringing in their homework, returning permission slips, or bringing their PE gear. There are approaches teachers can take to support students' organisation and planning:

- Students with DCD benefit from seeing the whole task before being asked to undertake it. They need to understand what the end product looks like, and then to have the task broken up into individual steps.
- Offer instructions in smaller chunks, or in a step-by-step format, and include pictures or written instructions that students can refer back to.
- Provide additional time for students to complete a task.
- Help students with starting a task. For example, if you are asking students to write a story or a response, provide the student with the first sentence, from which they can follow on.

- Provide written instructions and reminders to families and students about homework that is due and upcoming assessments, or which days they have PE so that they can remember their PE gear.

## Physical activity

Engaging in physical education or sports activities can be more challenging for students with DCD. Because of their difficulties with spatial thinking, students with DCD may find it difficult to navigate the space they are in. Students with DCD may benefit from physical activities that are more independent and repetitive, before taking part in team sports or activities. There are steps teachers can take to support students with DCD to engage in sports and physical activity:

- Encourage the student to verbalise their plans for movement, to help them to process what their body needs to do next to achieve the goals of the activity. For example, do they need to move more to the left or the right, or kick a bit harder next time?
- Younger children may need more physical support, such as an adult helping them to place their hands, feet, or arms in the positions needed.
- Using cones or lines on the floor, or a marked spot on the floor for them to return to, may support their spatial thinking.

## In the playground

Students with DCD may find being in the playground for morning tea and lunch to be challenging, as they can struggle to engage in play and games with other children or to navigate playground equipment. Similarly, eating can be challenging for these students, including negotiating lunch boxes. There are steps teachers can take to support students in the playground:

- Talk with the student about what they are going to do during morning tea and lunch, including where in the grounds they will play.
- Provide younger children with a buddy who will look out for them in the playground.
- When transitioning from interval or lunch back into the classroom, give the student several minutes to regulate themselves before requiring them to engage in learning.

Students with DCD are more likely to experience social exclusion than their peers<sup>10</sup>. This can impact their confidence and self-esteem, which is also known to negatively affect academic performance. It is therefore important to ensure they have sufficient opportunities to engage in group activities, and that even if they do need to be taken out of class for certain learning activities, ensure that they can still spend a good proportion of their time in class with their peers.

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## Recommended further reading

Kirby, A. (2011). [Dyspraxia: Development Co-ordination Disorder](#). Souvenir Press.

## Endnotes

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