

# How parents can support the mental health of teenagers with dyspraxia



*Parents who responded to our survey in 2018 told us about the tools and strategies they use to help support their teenager's mental health. Not all of these strategies have a sound evidence-base and different things will work for different people so choose the ones that make the most sense to you.*

## Structure and routine

My daughter responds well to structure across school and home life. As a teenager she wants to 'do nothing' but that always ends badly with tantrums, frustration etc.

We go out regularly and I ensure even if we are not out, she's up and dressed, eating at regular times etc to keep a good routine that suits all of us, but also makes her feel refreshed and awake all day.

We explain everything and give plenty of notice if we want to do something. Ensure everything is planned out (no surprises).

A daily routine provides him with the structure he finds comforting and rewarding for his self-esteem. The fulfilment of his daily routines gives him confidence that he can take charge of things and make them a success. Without this, he quickly becomes despondent and feels hopeless about life. My hope is to help him to help him maintain a routine so that he can take this skill forward to his adult life when he is independent of my influence.

We implement a homework schedule that allows for frequent breaks and returning to a different topic after the break. If the work is incomplete it is returned to at a different time. This stops her working for a long time but not really achieving anything.

My son gets everything ready for the next week at school on a Friday night so that he doesn't have to do it on a Sunday when his anxiety levels are high.

## Dealing with the practical things

I make sure her life is as simple as possible so that she doesn't get annoyed at certain aspects she finds harder than others. Mostly I make sure her sleep pattern is regular, with limited battery on her phone so that being tired doesn't add to an already exhausting way of life.

Try to minimise stress, especially in the mornings. I have two ties, two calculators etc. We employ so many strategies to help her – timetables, lists, routines etc.

He's been allowed to touch type at school from age 8 which made a huge difference to his productivity and his enjoyment of school.

We don't expect him to organise himself for exam revision and are very hands-on re buying and filing folders, organising revision notes and plans etc so he has a clear plan and clear folders visibly marked. It is very time-consuming so don't underestimate! If you can, arrange to work from home and/or reduced hours in the run up

to and during exams to relieve anxiety and to ensure you can stay on top of their organisation.

We try to find ways to work around tasks she struggles with. When she realises she can do things it gives her a massive confidence boost.

Over the summer holidays I booked a cookery course which will be something new for him, but I feel it will open his mind to new possibilities and as home economics will be a new subject at secondary school for him I am hoping this will give him some experience and confidence when he goes to this lesson.

### Social support

We find it helps her to do extra-curricular things that her friends don't do so that she can feel she is excelling without comparing her achievement to theirs – she does climbing (which is good for muscle development), plays cello, is a Scout (where the boys are not as emotionally complicated as girls would be) and trampolining.

Arrange dates with non-school friends.

Encourage and support him to participate in social activities. Find activities that he enjoys and avoid pressuring him into doing things he is not interested in.

We sometimes let her skip extra events at school to manage tiredness and stress. We plan fun activities and rewards when there's something that has to be done.

Knowing how low he has become regarding school and friendship groups, to avoid too much thinking time and boredom I have booked many activities for the summer holiday, with free days in between for down-time at home. I have also looked for activities that encourage sensory input such as scuba diving and sport.

### Keeping active

Encourage a healthy lifestyle - getting out and about – cycling, running, days out etc.

Lots of exercise (not competitive team sports), stuff like cycling, volleyball, walking.

Exercise has helped his mental health to a certain extent.

I ensure that she eats a very healthy diet, has a good sleep routine and doesn't spend too much time in front of the TV or electronic devices. I encourage sufficient exercise and down time.

### Time to talk

When he gets anxious we try to discuss what is making him feel that way. We encourage him to do his best but explain that we love him the way he is anyway.

Getting the right diagnosis helped as my son realised he was not thick or lazy at school. We talk a lot about dyspraxia and offer practical and emotional support. We have pushed school to be more supportive and understanding and have accessed occupational therapy which helped emotionally as well as physically. Grandparents have been a good support mechanism too.

I try to be as calm as possible even in the most volatile situations. I make time to talk to and listen to him, praise him and reassure him about how much I and his family love him.

We recognise her courage when she faces situations which make her anxious. Sometimes we compromise – make a deal- if we are stuck.

Creating an environment/relationship where he can feel free to talk about anything. Telling him that crying/failing etc is ok and is acceptable/healthy. We show him examples of famous people that have failed etc.

Talking about how you feel, acknowledging strengths associated with dyspraxia as well as validating challenges. Recognising resilience and challenges that he has already overcome. Looking up videos of others who have similar needs so that he doesn't feel alone.

Giving him time on his own when he's feeling frustrated or angry to work through his feelings. Try to spend quality time together, possibly enjoying an activity so he feels comfortable to open up naturally. Ensure we make time to listen to him.

We talk to him about how far he's come and how well he copes with things other kids take for granted.

We talk, encourage open feelings among the four of us. We listen and learn and adjust to make life less stressful where possible.

We make communication a priority. Words of affirmation daily, physical affection, quality time spent with him and making space (and trying to be as patient as possible!) to listen to his worries, fears and frustrations.

Our other two kids are extremely kind and considerate to our DCD child. They will help and counsel her when she needs it, as do we.

If she gets frustrated we encourage her to concentrate on her breathing and take herself away from the stressful situation and then talk to someone.

We spend a lot of time with our son playing card games, pool, going swimming and trying to develop his interests in things such as cycling/motor bikes etc. But it is extremely difficult as he really has no get up and go, so needs to be cajoled/pushed constantly.

Being there to allow emotions to be verbalised, particularly during exam time.

Listen allow them time to get out all their frustrations, talk calmly, give clear responses but do not bombard them with lots of questions.

### Building self-esteem

We try to encourage him to do things that will improve his self-esteem, like helping others and concentrating on things he is good at.

Trying to persuade him that good grades at school do not matter and that we are proud of him for at least trying.

Encouraging him to develop his interests (maths, music, computers) so he is better than his peers.

We encourage him in what he excels at - acting, debating.

Encourage her to believe in herself. Dyspraxia doesn't mean she can't do the things that a lot of her friends do, it just means she has to work a bit harder. Praising her for her efforts and believing in herself has done wonders!

Being supportive and encouraging without being pushy. Understanding actual limits in abilities and not setting unrealistic expectations. Allowing him to fail and supporting him when he does. Finding strategies to overcome his difficulties and 'failures'.

I try to challenge negative thinking and highlight what she can do. I tell her that she is unique rather than different.

I remind him of the positive qualities he has and the many things he has achieved. I also try and help him see that it is normal to have negative emotions and that it is good to vocalise his concerns and feelings, rather than bottle them up.

### Working with school

Engaging with and working with the school SENCO from the outset. Encouraging my son to be open about his difficulties with his new friends at secondary school. With the support of his form tutor he gave a talk about dyspraxia and what it's like and that really empowered him.

Additional support with maths and computers science to 'play to his strengths'. Focus on what he can do rather than what he has challenges with.

I have done research and become more 'forceful' with the school to help me (and my son) have some recognition. It's not about being a 'pushy parent', it's about doing the best for your child.

### Helping with frustration, anxiety, self-regulation and well-being

If she storms and rages then we leave her to calm down, then make ourselves available when she is ready. We used zones of regulation which sometimes helps her regulate her mood. We separate who she is from her behaviour. We focus on her strengths and gifts.

Quiet rooms or a safe place to calm down. Being honest, love and support, listening.

We have found hypnotherapy a brilliant tool.

Books about overcoming anxiety, depression and self-harm as well as building her resilience and self-esteem. Mindfulness

We use a scale of 0-10 to enable me to gauge where his mental well-being is without me having to be invasive. When it is 0-2 I know I need to keep a very close eye on him, remove medication, sharps etc and lock them in the boot of my car. 3-4 I know

he is really struggling. 4-5 a little firm guidance to help him get on with his day. Above 5, leave him alone and let him enjoy feeling ok/happy/good.

I remind him of the coping strategies he learned at CAMHS.

I make sure each day he takes his medication despite him being 17 because of his DCD he tends to forget things and needs constant reminders. I found it has been very small steps and sometimes 5 steps backwards, but where he is now is no longer where he was last year as he is doing so well!

#### Stay calm and carry on

Although I work tirelessly keeping the kids happy, it's even more important that they don't see me upset by it all which leads to them feeling even worse than they already do. Me keeping strong and in control helps her mood greatly too.

I try not to get stressed about time-keeping and give him plenty of warning when we have to go somewhere. I try to keep calm myself when things get heated and quietly ask him not to shout as shouting won't help find the missing things.

I have realised that he does not 'hear' what I say if I shout. Try leaving it and half-an-hour later writing bullet points e.g. 'I was angry/upset because X happened, what I wanted was Y, this is how it made me feel, in future why don't we do Z?' We have gone from having major meltdowns and arguments that lasted days to my son reading these notes and saying 'Oh, is that what you meant? OK, I agree!!'

Further information available from:

Dyspraxia Foundation, 8 West Alley Hitchin Herts SG5 1EG

Helpline Tel: 01462 454986

Admin Tel: 01462 455016

Fax: 01462 455052

Web: [www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk](http://www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk)

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