

Making the World a Less Confusing Place

Let us put labels such as autistic spectrum disorder, dysphasia, dyspraxia, dyslexia and attention deficit disorder aside for a moment. It is likely that all these children have one thing in common – they are confused and *disorganised*.

Do you recognise children who:

- never quite manage to be in the right place at the right time with the right equipment?
- look genuinely surprised when they get it wrong?
- focus primarily on what is immediately in front of them without seeing the whole picture?
- depend on others to spell out what is happening, what to do next, what the rules are, what can be assumed or predicted?

How do any of us make sense of anything? We accumulate our experiences of the world and see repetition, links and *patterns* – and recognise that patterns are more important than precision. Whether we are looking at a palace, lighthouse or shed, the windows will always be found in the walls, somewhere between the ground and the roof. Armed with this knowledge we can produce new buildings with the windows in the appropriate place – we are not confined to replicating an identical picture every time. Furthermore, if a house was obscured we would assume that behind the tree was a window, not a chimney or gate.

Through patterns we learn what to expect, what to infer, what to accept and what to reject. Patterns bring familiarity, predictability and security. And paradoxically, patterns give us the confidence to accept change and try something new, knowing we've got the security of the old pattern to fall back on. It is no coincidence that the most confused children over-compensate with a safety-net of rigid behaviour patterns and rituals – this is their way of creating order out of chaos.

Without an appreciation of patterns and rules, disorganised children cannot be flexible or plug gaps. Much of the time they are looking at only part of the picture and guessing at the rest. With so little information to hand they cannot afford to switch off for a second – and quickly become confused, irritable, exhausted, frustrated, despondent.

Disorganised children learn most effectively by:

- **Attending to one thing at a time.** *Single-tasking* with *multi-sensory* input is the best combination – hence their ability to focus on videos, computers and play-stations ad infinitum! Swapping between listening to and tracking a teacher round the classroom, looking at the board and making notes leads to overload in a very short space of time.
- **Seeing and doing rather than listening.** Listening is important too, but a simple diagram, visual reference or mimed sequence is worth countless explanations.

So the first step towards reducing their confusion is to maintain a single focus when introducing new concepts and to make everything visual with simple charts, checklists and diagrams.

Next we must compensate for and develop a sense of order:

① Show the whole thing

- Teach methodical scanning to ensure children see all relevant details
- Ensure tasks have a clear goal with step-by-step instructions
- Be direct and explicit – plug the gaps!
- Spell out the unwritten rules of social behaviour
- Clearly indicate, label, or colour-code separate components
- Change the order to avoid rote learning
- Use timelines (picture sequences) to illustrate familiar routines, choices and behavioural expectations so the child can see where they're coming from and where they are going. Some examples are included here with more at the seminar.

② Identify rules, patterns, reasons

- Teach comparison and classification by looking for similarities and differences in all the child's experience
- Do not expect children to just 'get it'. Look for links and make connections.
- Take away uncertainty by illustrating 'it depends' (see timeline example)
- Use timelines to explore cause-effect, prediction, inference and anticipation of danger
- Make generalisations out of specifics, eg, 'Your spiderman sweatshirt feels good because it's made of cotton'

③ Develop flexibility

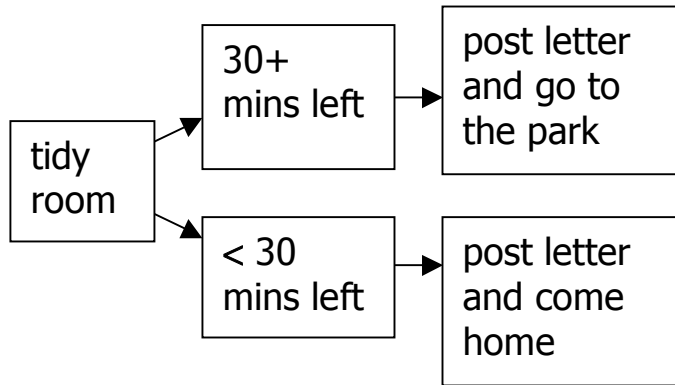
- Divide features into *always* present (eg, chairs have a seat, back and base) and *sometimes* present (cushion, castors, arms etc)
- Starting with a set rule or pattern, show what can be safely changed or embellished
- Use timelines to explore different endings
- Help children to expect the unexpected (see timeline example)

Useful resources

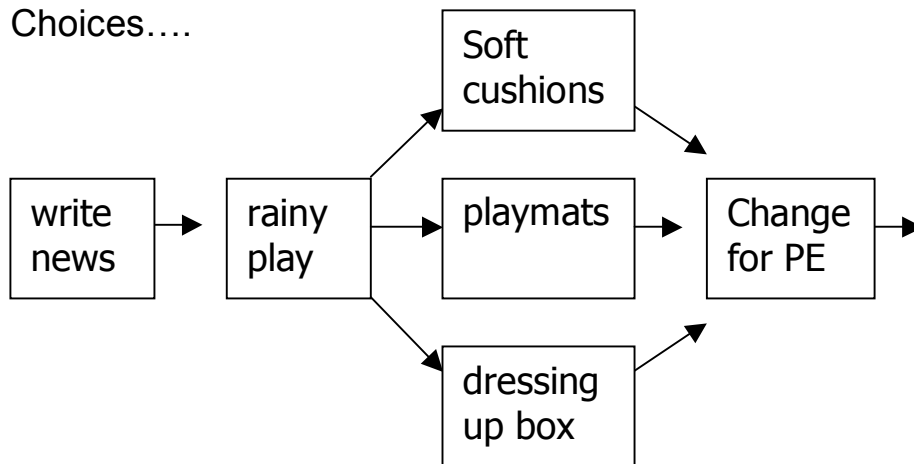
Social Skills Posters, Taskmaster Ltd, www.taskmasteronline.co.uk
Functional Language In the Classroom (2005), Maggie Johnson, Manchester Metropolitan University Commercial Office, 0161 247 2535
INSET and training events: Maggie Johnson, talktalk@compuserve.com

Examples of timelines (add pictures or symbols)

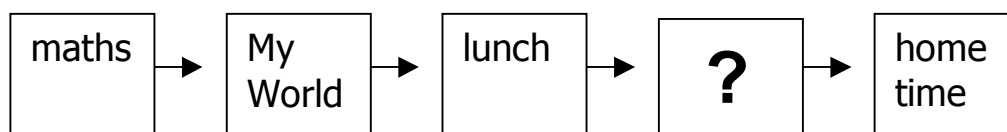
It depends.....



Choices....



Surprises....



we don't find out what's in the 'don't know' box until later