

Understanding Special Needs Students

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Key concepts, strategies, and resources for educators, support staff, and families

1. What “Special Needs” Means

Dimension	Description	Typical Examples
Disability Type	The underlying condition that affects learning, behavior, or physical functioning.	Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), ADHD, dyslexia, hearing loss, cerebral palsy
Impact Area	The domain(s) in which the disability creates barriers.	Academic (reading, math), communication, social interaction, motor skills, sensory processing
Legal Status	How the student is identified under law.	<i>IDEA</i> (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) – “students with disabilities”; <i>Section 504</i> – “students with a disability who need accommodations”
Strengths & Needs	A balanced view that recognizes abilities while addressing challenges.	Strong visual memory + difficulty with oral instructions

2. Core Principles for Working with Special Needs Learners

1. **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** – Design instruction that works for *all* learners from the start (multiple means of representation, engagement, expression).
 2. **Individualization** – Tailor goals, materials, and supports to each student’s IEP/504 plan.
 3. **Strength-Based Approach** – Build on existing talents; use them as entry points for new skills.
 4. **Collaboration** – Teachers, specialists, families, and the student share responsibility for planning and progress.
 5. **Data-Driven Decision Making** – Use ongoing assessment (formal & informal) to adjust instruction.
 6. **Positive Behavioral Supports** – Prevent problems by teaching expected behaviors and reinforcing them consistently.
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3. Common Categories of Special Needs & Typical Classroom Implications

Category	Core Characteristics	Classroom Implications	Typical Accommodations / Modifications
Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD)	Difficulties processing written language, math concepts, or both (e.g., dyslexia, dyscalculia).	Slow reading fluency, spelling errors, trouble with word problems.	• Text-to-speech software • Reduced reading load (shorter passages) • Graphic organizers for writing
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	Social communication deficits, restricted interests, sensory sensitivities.	Challenges with group work, transitions, noise.	• Visual schedules • Structured work stations • Social stories & role play
Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	Inattention, hyperactivity, impulsivity.	Off-task behavior, difficulty completing tasks.	• Break tasks into short chunks • Seat near teacher • Use timers & movement breaks • Check-in/check-out system
Emotional/Behavioral Disorders (EBD)	Persistent emotional dysregulation, aggression, withdrawal.	Disruptive behavior, low motivation.	• Calm-down corner • Clear, consistent expectations
Physical / Health Impairments	Mobility, vision, hearing, chronic illness.	Accessibility barriers, fatigue, need for assistive tech.	• wheelchair accessible layout • Captioned videos • Flexible attendance policies

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Category	Core Characteristics	Classroom Implications	Typical Accommodations / Modifications
Intellectual Disabilities	Below?average cognitive functioning, adaptive skill deficits.	Slower concept acquisition, need for concrete examples.	• Simplified language • Repetition & practice • Real?life contexts

4. The IEP/504 Process (U.S. Context