

Making Sense of **ASYNCHRONY and NEURODIVERSITY**

How can we support our students?

Dr. Austina De Bonte, Ed.D.

Bridges Graduate School of Cognitive Diversity in Education

Consultant, Smart is not Easy

austina@smartisnoteasy.com

SMART ≠ easy

AGENDA

- What is asynchrony?
- Neuroscience of asynchrony
- Executive function & how to help
- **Turn & talk**
- What is neurodiversity? (Hint, it's not just autism)
- **Exercise: Select a student profile & discuss in small groups**
- Neurodiversity flavors & strategies
- **Exercise: Problem solve student profiles in small groups**
- Preview: Getting flexible

SMART ≠ easy

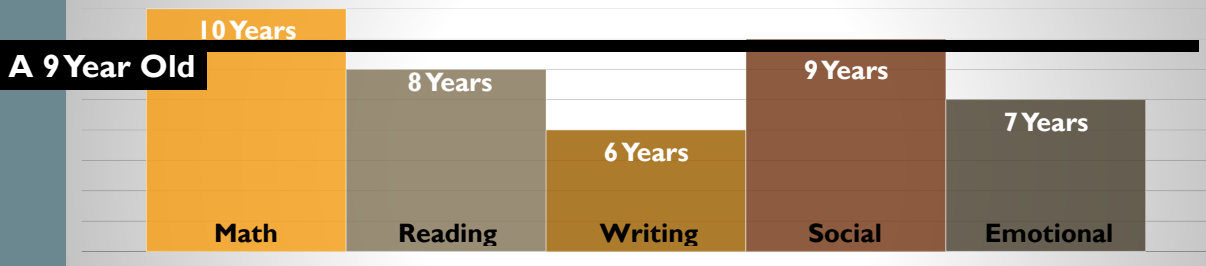


ASYNCHRONY

What does it mean for a student to have **asynchronous development?**

SMART \neq easy

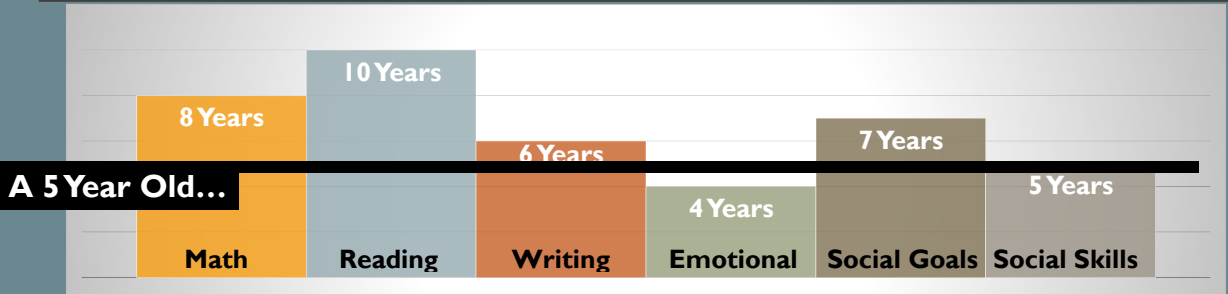
ASYNCHRONY



- Many kids develop asynchronously
- Just because some areas are behind, **don't assume that all areas will be behind**
- Just because some areas are ahead, **don't assume all areas will be ahead**

SMART \neq easy

ASYNCHRONY



- Many kids develop asynchronously
- Just because some areas are behind, **don't assume that all areas will be behind**
- Just because some areas are ahead, **don't assume all areas will be ahead**

SMART \neq easy

ASYNCHRONY IS EVERYWHERE

- Happens in **ALL** demographic groups
 - “Typical” students
 - Multilingual students
 - Students receiving special education services
 - Students living in low-income households
 - Students experiencing homelessness
 - All racial groups

SMART \neq easy



**NEUROSCIENCE
OF ASYNCHRONY**



**EVERY BRAIN IS UNIQUE -
JUST LIKE A FINGERPRINT**
(VALIZADEH ET AL., 2018)

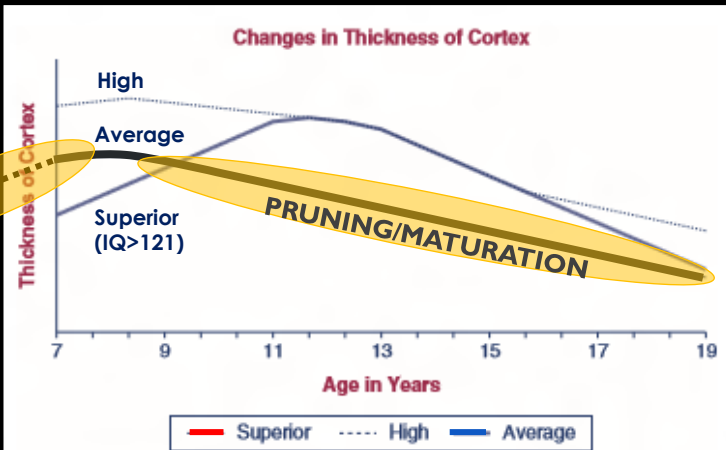


Figure 1.2 Changes in the thickness of the brain's cortex between the ages of 7 and 19 in individuals of superior, high, and average intelligence.

Source: Adapted from Shaw et al., 2006.

PHYSICAL DIFFERENCES IN BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

(SHAW ET AL., 2006)

SMART ≠ easy

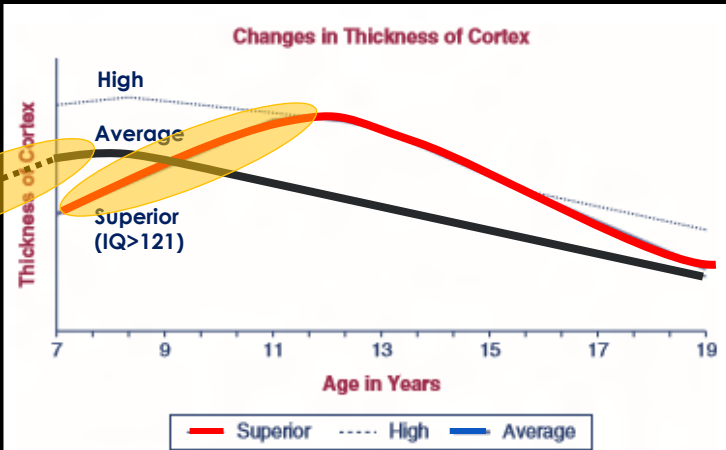


Figure 1.2 Changes in the thickness of the brain's cortex between the ages of 7 and 19 in individuals of superior, high, and average intelligence.

Source: Adapted from Shaw et al., 2006.

PHYSICAL DIFFERENCES IN BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

TIMELINE FOR BRAIN GROWTH & EXPANSION

SMART ≠ easy

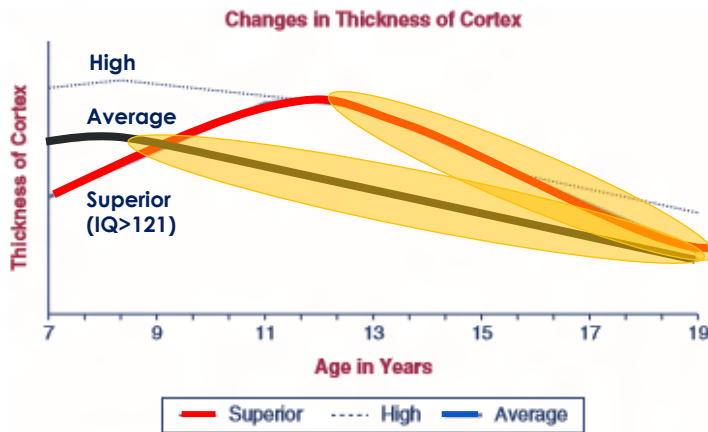


Figure 1.2 Changes in the thickness of the brain's cortex between the ages of 7 and 19 in individuals of superior, high, and average intelligence.

Source: Adapted from Shaw et al., 2006.

PHYSICAL
DIFFERENCES
IN BRAIN
DEVELOPMENT

TIMELINE
FOR PRUNING
&
MATURATION

SMART ≠ easy

A DIFFERENT RESEARCHER SAYS:

“Kids who had higher IQs to begin with seemed to have an extended period in adolescence during which they retained the ability to **learn at a rapid pace**, just like much younger children.”

(Brant et al., 2013)

SMART ≠ easy

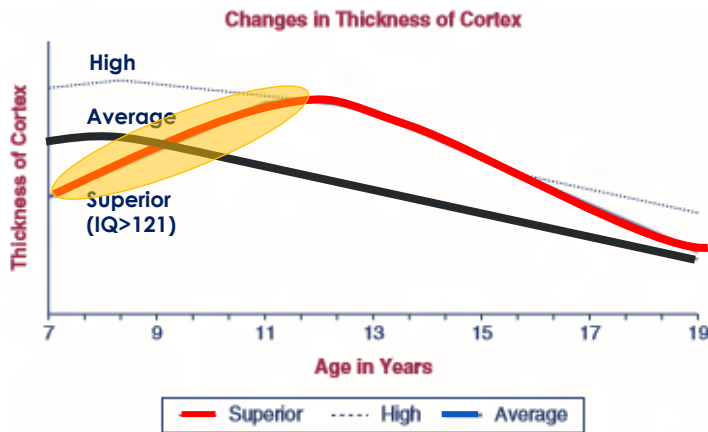


Figure 1.2 Changes in the thickness of the brain's cortex between the ages of 7 and 19 in individuals of superior, high, and average intelligence.

Source: Adapted from Shaw et al., 2006.

**PHYSICAL
DIFFERENCES
IN BRAIN
DEVELOPMENT**

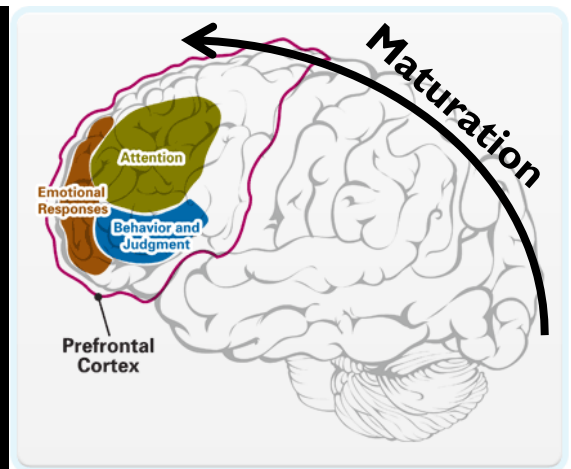
**TIMELINE
FOR BRAIN
GROWTH &
EXPANSION**

SMART ≠ easy

**YOUR BRAIN MATURES
BACK TO FRONT**

“Grey matter thickens in childhood but then thins in a wave that **begins at the back of the brain** and reaches the front by early adulthood” (Powell, 2006)

“The **prefrontal cortex** is the decision-making part of the brain, responsible for [the] ability to plan and think about the consequences of actions, solve problems and control impulses.”



“Executive Function”

SMART ≠ easy

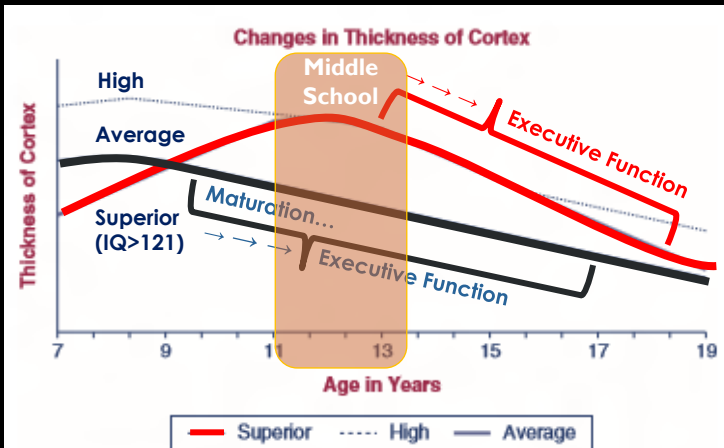


Figure 1.2 Changes in the thickness of the brain's cortex between the ages of 7 and 19 in individuals of superior, high, and average intelligence.

Source: Adapted from Shaw et al., 2006.

**PHYSICAL
DIFFERENCES
IN BRAIN
DEVELOPMENT**

**EXECUTIVE
FUNCTION
DEVELOPS
LATER?**

SMART ≠ *easy*

WHAT IS EXECUTIVE FUNCTION

Executive Function
is NOT Correlated
with Intelligence

“If I’m so smart, why can’t I find my keys?” – S



Organizing things, time, or procedures

Multitasking

Keep track of things

Planning

Time management

Breaking down projects



Impulse control, inhibition

Sustaining attention through distraction

Waiting to speak until it’s your turn

Mental flexibility

Black & white thinking

Initiating, getting started

SMART ≠ *easy*

EXECUTIVE FUNCTION IS A COMMON CHALLENGE

- Many kids will grow into it
 - But probably not until high school (...up to age 25)
- Need scaffolding and accommodations
- **Tough love does not work**
 - Are report card grades measuring subject mastery or EF?
 - Consider growth mindset grading practices
- **Goal:** Preserve self-confidence until brain maturation happens (avoid internalizing messages about being “lazy” or “unmotivated”)

SMART ≠ easy

A DOZEN WAYS TO SUPPORT EF

1. All classwork, homework, due dates posted in ONE place
2. Make time visible (schedules, calendars, timers, tech)
3. Consistent classroom routines
4. Visible cues, charts, checklists for EVERYTHING
5. Graphic organizers, sticky notes & highlighters to scaffold thinking
6. Pre-planning to break down big projects
7. Have extra pencils/markers/rulers/etc. available
8. Teacher keeps a “master binder” of all handouts
9. Folders, not binders, to organize backpacks & desks
10. Flexible policy for late & missing work; Growth mindset grading
11. Class time to update the planner & organize backpacks/folders/desks
12. Lots of reminders (group and individual)

(Always Follow Students' IEP & 504 Plans)



SMART ≠ easy

SUPPORTING EXECUTIVE FUNCTION



Teaching Skills & Tools
Classroom Routines



Ongoing, Hands-on Help to
Cue WHEN to Use the Tools

Fade into
Technology
Reminders

SMART \neq easy

Let's Talk

**SHARE 1 TAKEAWAY
WITH AN ELBOW PARTNER
HOW TO BETTER SUPPORT EF
IN YOUR CLASSROOM?**

SMART \neq easy

NEURODIVERSITY

OK, so how is **asynchrony** related to **neurodiversity**?
And what about **twice exceptional (2e?)**

SMART \neq easy

WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

- Neurodiversity is not just about **autism**
- Different brain “operating system,” patterns of **strengths** and **challenges**
- **Careful:** neurodiverse brains are not “worse” (or “better”)
 - They are **DIFFERENT**
- Many common diagnoses are better understood as neurodiversity
 - **ADHD** – strengths in quick response time, acting under pressure, noticing changes
 - **Dyslexia** – strengths in 3D, visual/spatial, creativity, big picture, entrepreneurial
 - **Autism** – strengths in spotting patterns, details, logic

Neurodiversity is the most common cause of asynchrony

easy

HIGH IQ IS A FORM OF NEURODIVERSITY

- Regional brain volume is **BIGGER** in some areas (left hemisphere, bilateral frontal cortex, phonological loop, working memory, sensory, anxiety, **amygdala** ← emotions)
 - And smaller in others (lateral-parietal junction)
- **DENSER** connectivity between some areas (arcuate fasciculus, corpus callosum - “information highways”)
 - And sparser connectivity in others
- Development happens on a different timeline
- **High IQ brains are physically different**

SMART ≠ easy

HIGH IQ IS A FORM OF NEURODIVERSITY

- Regional brain volume is **BIGGER** in some areas (left hemisphere, bilateral frontal cortex, phonological loop, working memory, sensory, anxiety, **amygdala** ← emotions)
 - And smaller in others (lateral-parietal junction)
- **DENSER** connectivity between some areas (arcuate fasciculus, corpus callosum - “information highways”)
 - And sparser connectivity in others
- Development happens on a different timeline
- **High IQ brains are physically different**

(Schnack, 2014)
 (Roman, 2018)
 (Haier, 2017)
 (Nusbaum, 2017)
 (Ganjavi, 2011)
 (Hilger, 2017)
 (Koenis, 2015)
 (Haier, 2004)
 (Wilke, 2003)
 (Frangou, 2004)
 (Shaw, 2006)
 (Lewis, 2018)
 (Burgaleta, 2014)
 (Roman, 2018)



gro-gifted.org

WHO ARE THE TWICE-EXCEPTIONAL (2e)?

Bright, gifted, talented, **highly capable**, and/or high IQ
AND

Neurodiversity, disability, learning difference,
mental health concern, and/or other challenge

**“Their gifts may mask their disabilities
and their disabilities may mask their gifts.”**

(Reis et al., 2014, p. 222)

SMART ≠ *easy*

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE WHEN KIDS HIT THEIR LIMIT?

- explosive behavior
- distractible
- trouble finishing work
- trouble getting started
- work takes way too long
- anxiety
- perfectionism
- low frustration tolerance
- impulsive
- **Sometimes, minimal outward clues, or only at home/afterschool**

Easy to Misunderstand

“lazy”

“unmotivated”

“doesn’t care”

“mis-identified as HiCap”

Probably a lot more kids are 2e than we think.
Maybe even the majority of HiCap kids.

Many 2e kids never get properly
identified as HiCap or for their disability.

SMART ≠ *easy*

KIDS WANT TO DO WELL

“Kids do well when they can.”
– Dr. Ross Greene

When there’s a problem, there’s a reason.

SMART ≠ easy

BEHAVIOR IS COMMUNICATION

- When a student is having a hard time, **you will see it in their behavior**
- “Not won’t, **CAN’T**” – Dr. Ross Greene
- "Shifting from addressing behaviors to trying to **understand their origins and triggers** means making a shift from managing our children to **understanding them deeply.**" – Dr. Mona Delahooke
- **“It’s never about lazy.” – Dr. Austina De Bonte**

SMART ≠ easy

KIDS MASK & COMPENSATE MUCH MORE THAN YOU

Symptoms can be **subtle** until kids reach their limit

- Masking vs. compensating
 - **Masking**: pretending to be “normal” (neurotypical)
 - **Compensating**: using strengths to make up for disability areas
- Implication #1: Masking & compensating takes **ENERGY**
 - Fatigue leads to overwhelm & dysregulation
- Implication #2: Challenging curriculum finally surfaces difficulties

SMART \neq easy

BUCKET THEORY

- Everyone has a bucket to handle adversity
- As challenges stack up, they fill up your bucket
- When your bucket overflows, that's **overwhelm**

Game Plan

FIRST, STOP FOCUSING ON THE TRIGGERS

Identify the rocks in your bucket

- Get them out
- Make them smaller
- Self-understanding (Predict!)

Create more space for **resilience**



Bucket by farra nugraha; Rocks by James Cottell and Sean Maldjian from (CC BY 3.0)

SMART \neq easy

Schools cannot make a medical diagnosis.
A school evaluation (IEP) can identify an educational need.

Each needs a **DIFFERENT** professional to diagnose

Psychologist

<p>auditory processing disorder (APD/CAPD)</p> <p>vision processing disorders (VPD)</p> <p>sensory processing disorders</p> <p>medical conditions retained reflexes</p> <p>apraxia physical conditions</p> <p>PANDAS/PANS sleep problems</p>	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center;">ADHD</td> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center;">dysgraphia (SLD writing)</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">autism</td> <td style="text-align: center;">dyscalculia (SLD math)</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">dyslexia (SLD reading)</td> <td style="text-align: center;">anxiety</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">depression</td> <td style="text-align: center;">depression</td> </tr> </table>	ADHD	dysgraphia (SLD writing)	autism	dyscalculia (SLD math)	dyslexia (SLD reading)	anxiety	depression	depression
ADHD	dysgraphia (SLD writing)								
autism	dyscalculia (SLD math)								
dyslexia (SLD reading)	anxiety								
depression	depression								

SMART ≠ easy

Keep this student in mind as we talk about the many flavors of neurodiversity

Let's Talk

.....

.....

STUDENT PROFILES

WHAT SUPPORT(S) DOES THIS STUDENT NEED?

Choose One:

- Sherry (K)
- Roberto (2nd)
- Paula (3rd)
- Victor (4th)
- Mika (5th)

Work in groups of 3-5 people

Select & discuss one student profile

SMART ≠ easy

COMMON FLAVORS

- Most neurodiverse kids have more than one flavor
- There are **MANY MORE** possibilities
- Teachers are **NOT** qualified to diagnose (or even suggest)
 - But having awareness of the possibilities will help you problem solve
 - And better understand any diagnoses in kids' IEPs and 504s



VISION PROCESSING DISORDERS (VPD)

Common but subtle – worth screening anyone having trouble

How the brain processes what the eyes see

Many flavors: Convergence insufficiency, teaming, tracking, 3D, distance vs. near

Letters/words/numbers flip (**b d p q**), move, or get blurry

Goofy mistakes in math (**+ - x**)

Copying errors. Inconsistent spacing. Lack of punctuation. Capital letters mid-word

Clumsy, trouble with sports & balls, dislikes 3D movies/rides

Fatigue, lack of stamina when reading, especially with small fonts

Prefer graphic novels, books with pictures & captions

Inconsistent scores on standardized tests

VPD is NOT dyslexia, but it's common to have both

SMART \neq easy

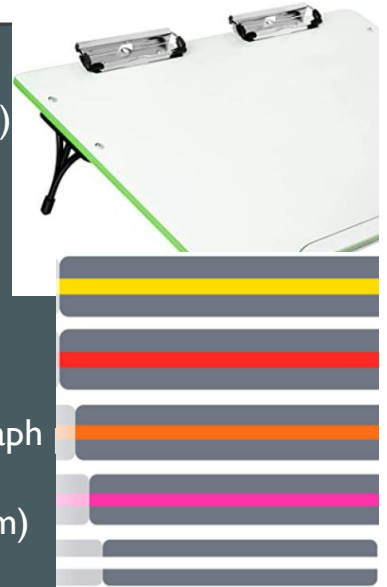
VISION PROCESSING DISORDERS (VPD) – HOW TO HELP

Home Interventions

- Diagnose with a specialist (covd.org, “F” credential)
- Vision therapy is effective at any age

School Accommodations

- Preferential seating up front
- Large fonts (enlarge, e-readers)
- Slant board
- Reading guide strips
- Turn notebook paper sideways for math (or 1/2” graph
- Audiobooks, text-to-speech
- Typing all classwork/assessments (SnapTypeApp.com)



AUDITORY PROCESSING DISORDER (APD)

Strengths: super-sensitive hearing, hears things others miss

One ear “hears” a split second before the other

Wears hats, hoods, long hair, headphones that cover the ears

Dislikes noisy environments, trouble understanding in background noise

Fatigue, comprehension problems in noisy environments

Doesn’t hear name called. Misses or mishears classroom instruction.

Trouble with conversational timing (social!)

Rising anxiety/fatigue/frustration through the day

May look like ADHD, ODD, PDA, explosive behavior, or withdrawal

Common reason for classroom overwhelm/behavior

SMART ≠ easy

AUDITORY PROCESSING DISORDER (APD) – HOW TO HELP

Home Interventions/Tools

- Auditory therapies (many options; mixed results)
- Ear filter (ablekidsfoundation.org)
- Low gain hearing aids (drreaestout.com)

School Accommodations

- Preferential seating away from noise
- Check in with student for understanding
- Auditory breaks with headphones or quiet room
- Headphones for focus work/assessments
- Minimize headphones for pure quiet. Headphones with SOUND ON

- **Teacher always uses microphone!**

SMART ≠ easy

(STEALTH) DYSLEXIA (SLD READING)

- **Strengths:** creativity, verbal, visual-spatial, 3D, problem solving
- Phonological awareness, trouble with rhyming & wordplay
- Trouble sounding out (but may read via sight words)
 - **Screeners can overlook students who can read via sight words**
- Trouble with spelling, writing, grammar
- Skips or substitutes words when reading
- Inconsistent scores on standardized tests
- Trouble with rote memory (math facts, multiplication, months of year...)
- But, **excellent comprehension and high verbal skills**

SMART ≠ easy

WWW.THEPASTTEST.COM

- Free ORAL screener for phonological awareness by Dr. Kirkpatrick
- Works even with pre-readers!
- **Script:**
 - Say ... Now say ... but don't say the ... sound
 - Say ... Now say ... but change the ... to ...
- **Try it with an elbow partner**
 - Say TROOP but don't say the /r/ sound
 - Say CREEP but change the /ē/ to the /ooh/ sound
 - Now, make up your own!

SMART ≠ easy

(STEALTH) DYSLEXIA – HOW TO HELP

Home/School Interventions

- High dose dyslexia-specific structured literacy
- Home tutors: wabida.org, wiredforreading
- FREE: treasurehunt.prenda.co

School Accommodations

- Do not call on student to read out loud
- Audiobooks, text-to-speech (learningally.com)
- Dictation, speech-to-text, or a scribe
- Typing all assignments/assessments (SnapTypeApp.com)
- Access to spellcheck for all classwork/assessments

DO NOT grade spelling (unless that is the learning objective)

- Extra time for assignments/assessments

Don't Wait

Intervention in 1st or 2nd grade is twice as effective as intervention in 3rd grade (Lovett et al., 2017)

SMART ≠ easy

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

- Enable higher order thinking without getting bogged down in the mechanics
- Keyboarding
- Dictation/Scribe
- Audiobooks (learningally.com)
- Spellcheck
- Grammar tools/grammarly

Snaptypeapp.com
iPad, iPhone
Android, Chromebook

What Has the Superhero Done Lately?
Regular Past Tense Verbs

Directions: The superhero has been busy! Fill in each blank with a verb from the word bank. Don't forget to change it to past tense!

dance climb carry chase jump laugh

I **jumped** over a tall building to catch a thief.

I _____ up a tree to rescue a kitty.

I _____ a bad guy out of town.

I _____ a hurt boy to the hospital.

DYSCALCULIA (SLD MATH)

- **Strengths:** creativity, visual-spatial, 3D perception
- Less well understood than cousin dyslexia
- Difficulty with judging quantities, less vs. more
- Lack of number sense
- Trouble with calculations
- Can memorize some sequences but not understand why
- Good math problem solving skills, but trouble with math facts?
 - **Consider dyslexia**

SMART ≠ easy

DYSCALCULIA (SLD MATH) – HOW TO HELP

Dyslexia & Dyscalculia come with **STRENGTHS** in visual-spatial perception and **CHALLENGES** in rote memory

School Accommodations

- Provide manipulatives, graphic organizers, models
- Provide lookup materials for math facts
 - Hundreds chart
 - Multiplication table
- (Provide calculator)

Kids will learn their facts **spatially** through repeated visual lookup

SMART \neq easy

ADHD – AN INTEREST-BASED NERVOUS SYSTEM

- **Types:** Inattentive, Hyperactive, Combined
- Not lack of attention, trouble regulating attention
- **Strengths:** hyper-focus, noticing changes, fast decisions
- Can focus when: **(INCUP)**
 - **Interesting**
 - **Novel**
 - **Challenging**
 - **Urgent**
 - **Pressure (Social)**

How to Self-Hack Your ADHD Brain

(Dodson, 2018)

- **NOT:** rote, boring, easy, even if very important

Trouble getting started

Staying on task

Time management

Breaking down big projects

Executive function

Can produce when interested in the topic

SMART \neq easy

ADHD RESEARCH

- Movement in ADHD kids improves reaction time & oxygenation in Dorsolateral Prefrontal Cortex (Hoy et al., 2024)
- ADHD kids move more when working memory is needed (Orban et al., 2017)
- Fidgeting in ADHD adults increases sustained attention (Son et al. 2024)
- ADHD kids who had more intense movement had better performance on a cognitive task (Note: TD children performed worse with movement) (Hartanto et al., 2015)
- **Emerging theory is that movement is a compensation strategy to maintain alertness in the ADHD brain**

Let ADHD kids MOVE! It helps them THINK

SMART ≠ easy

ADHD – HOW TO HELP

Home Interventions

- Stimulant meds can help (and may be therapeutic)

Tools

- Standing desk, wobble chair, chair bands, fidgets, **walking lane**
- Technology for reminders

School Accommodations

- All of the Executive Function accommodations
- Body doubling – work with a partner
- **Make classwork INCUP**
- Non-distracting area for assessments

Beware: “extra time” may not help (if it’s purely ADHD)

Search: “ADHD accommodations ideas”

SMART ≠ easy

AUTISM

- **Strengths: logic, rules, deep sustained interests, noticing patterns**
- Probably way more common than we think, especially in girls (#actuallyautistic)
- Different brain operating system – not broken, **different**
- Creates challenges in **unsupportive environments**
 - → DSM lists distress responses of autistic individuals in **unsupportive** environments
- **Essence of Autism**
 - **Sensory differences** (interoception, tactile, auditory, visual, etc.)
 - **Autistic social patterns** (see: Double Empathy Problem)
 - **Monotropism** (Special Interests SPINs, focus on details over big picture)
- **Anxiety, irritability, perfectionism, prone to getting overwhelmed**
- Non-Clues: eye contact, empathy, social, affectionate, humor, creativity

SMART ≠ easy

AUTISM – HOW TO HELP

Home/School Interventions

- ABA – danger! Pretending to be “neurotypical” today → Burnout later
- Instead: Neurodiversity-affirming counseling/coaching to understand differences
 - Know when & how to adapt (social norms, behavior expectations, etc.)

School Accommodations

- Provide executive function supports
- **Minimize the amount of masking the student must do (Living in Tokyo)**
- Provide extra time to develop strength areas & special interests (SPINs)

Understanding

- Self-understanding as neurodivergent, not broken
- Decide where to spend your energy

SMART ≠ easy

WRITING CHALLENGES (DYSGRAPHIA / SLD WRITING)

5 Different Causes:

- ✓ Stealth dyslexia (especially spelling)
- ✓ Vision Processing Disorders (VPD)
 - Fine motor/muscular (OT)
 - Motor automaticity in writing letters/numbers
 - Trouble getting ideas out, organizing thoughts, getting started

Figure out the specific cause(s)

SMART ≠ easy

FINE MOTOR/MUSCULAR

Root Cause

- Small muscles
- Big muscles
- Core/trunk muscles
- Stamina
- Coordination
- Retained infant reflexes

Clues

“My hand hurts”

Unusual pencil grip

Heavy (or light) pencil lines

Posture/wriggling

Trouble crossing midline

ALSO trouble with
drawing and crafts

SMART ≠ easy

FINE MOTOR/MUSCULAR – HOW TO HELP

- Occupational therapy (OT)
- Tiny crayons/chalk
- Playdoh/clay
- Pencil grip devices
- Perler beads and other fine motor activities



After age 9-10, switch to keyboarding or dictation

WRITING CHALLENGES (DYSGRAPHIA / SLD WRITING)

5 Different Causes:

- ✓ Stealth dyslexia (especially spelling)
- ✓ Vision Processing Disorders (VPD)
- ✓ Fine motor/muscular (OT)
 - Motor automaticity in writing letters/numbers
 - Trouble getting ideas out, organizing thoughts, getting started

Figure out the specific cause(s)

SMART ≠ easy

MOTOR AUTOMATICITY – ROOT CAUSE

- Brain-based automaticity of letter formation
- “Muscle memory” for letters and numbers
- Should be automatic by 2nd or 3rd grade

Clues

Letters aren't stroked the same way every time

Letters on the same page look different

Messy handwriting

OR very neat (but very slow)

“Drawing” each letter

SMART ≠ easy

MOTOR AUTOMATICITY – HOW TO HELP

- Lazy 8 Exercise for PreK-2 ([Video](#))



- ◆ Cursive might give kids a 2nd chance
- ◆ Arrowsmith Program “Word & Tracing”

Needs a LOT of repetition as kids get older

After age 9-10, switch to keyboarding or dictation

SMART ≠ easy

WRITING CHALLENGES (DYSGRAPHIA / SLD WRITING)

5 Different Causes:

- ✓ Stealth dyslexia (especially spelling)
- ✓ Vision Processing Disorders (VPD)
- ✓ Fine motor/muscular (OT)
- ✓ Motor automaticity in writing letters/numbers
 - Trouble getting ideas out, organizing thoughts, getting started

Figure out the specific cause(s)

SMART ≠ easy

THIS IS A TOUGH TRANSITION



Lots of interconnected ideas in brain



First, ●. Then ●, ●, and ●.
●. ●. ● because ●.

Writing is one word at a time

SMART ≠ easy

HOW TO HELP

1. Get ideas out of brain **in a messy way**
2. THEN organize **where you can see it**

How?

- Sticky notes
- Mind map
- Drawing
- Dictation to a computer
- Human scribe
- **Walk & talk – pair students up**

Help each student find what works for them

**Topic/paragraph
graphic organizers
WON'T HELP
in Step 1.
Why? They impose
order too soon**

SMART ≠ easy

WRITING CHALLENGES (DYSGRAPHIA / SLD WRITING)

5 Different Causes:

- ✓ Stealth dyslexia (especially spelling)
- ✓ Vision Processing
- ✓ Fine motor/mus
- ✓ Motor automati
- ✓ Trouble getting

Anxiety

from past difficulties
fear of criticism
writing is vulnerable...

... writing started

Figure out the specific cause(s)

SMART ≠ easy

PROVIDING HELP THAT'S ACTUALLY HELPFUL

- **Different strategies for different causes**
 - Interventions & Tools
 - Accommodations

When in doubt,
Provide more support

UNDERSTANDING IS KEY

- When kids understand their own strengths/challenges, **they're no longer walking on quicksand**
- When adults recognize the **reasons** for kids' challenges/behaviors
 - Provide neurodiversity-affirming, strength-based supports
 - **We can find much more empathy & patience**
 - Stop blaming kids for things that are largely outside their control

SMART \neq easy

Let's Talk

STUDENT PROFILES

Work in groups of 3-5 people

With that more detailed understanding of neurodiversity,
what does this student need?

SMART \neq easy

POLYVAGAL SAFETY IS ESSENTIAL

Learning only happens here

Porges polyvagal theory

- **Neuroception: Nervous system is constantly scanning the environment for safety**
- Co-regulation with safe, trusted others

Create a neurodiversity-affirming classroom (& home)

- Relationship with teacher (& parents)
- Environmental safety in classroom (& home)
- Relational safety with classmates (& family)

Ventral Vagal
safe, connected,
calm, social

Sympathetic
fight/flight/freeze
flop/fawn
"take action"

Dorsal Vagal
shutdown,
overwhelm



Adapted from Deb Dana 2022; Porges 2011



Rewarding neurotypical learning styles teaches ALL kids that neurotypical brains are superior.

This is harmful to neurodivergent kids. 

CREATE A NEURODIVERSITY AFFIRMING CLASSROOM & HOME ENVIRONMENT

Infographic by #neurowild on Instagram & Facebook

SMART ≠ easy

HOW STUDENT NEEDS MIGHT DIFFER

- Vision Clarity/Stamina
- Light Sensitivity
- Auditory Clarity/Sensitivity
- Tactile Sensitivity
- Self-Regulation
- Organization Skills
- Emotional Sensitivity
- Need for Movement
- Social Differences

Our Job

Honor individual differences

Provide supports to maximize student learning

Keep supporting until development catches up

Protect from psychological harm

SMART ≠ easy

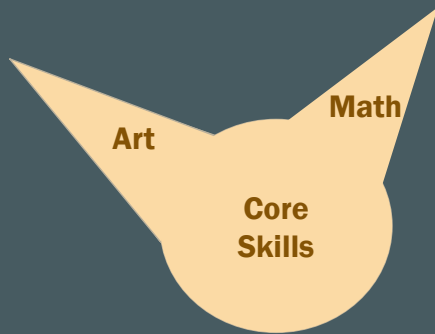
OUR GOAL

- Every student feels safe 100% of the time
- Every student can be their authentic self MOST of the time
 - **Minimize the amount of masking/compensating needed to participate**
- Every student is **DIFFERENT** – so to achieve this goal we must be

FLEXIBLE

SMART ≠ easy

Spiky Strengths



Well-Rounded



Colleges are looking for “spiky” applicants!

SMART \neq easy

FLIP THE SCRIPT!

**FOCUS MORE ON
BUILDING UP STRENGTHS**

THAN ON FIXING CHALLENGES

(Especially as students get older)

SMART \neq easy

Instagram @kuso.kame.gunso



If accommodations
are sufficient,

this is what we
should see.

<https://tinyurl.com/turtleskateboard>

SMART \neq easy

THANK YOU

- **Dr. Austina De Bonte**
- austina@smartisnoteasy.com

Questions? Discussion?

SMART \neq easy