

# Education: From pre-K to college

By Anna Johnson

## How to identify Complex Learners

**A**s parents and educators, we understand that one size does not fit all. Your child might approach social situations slowly, while someone else's child jumps right in. One student learns best with verbal prompts, while another does better with visual cues. Right out of the gate, children display preferences for how they take in and communicate information. Our brains are all "wired" differently.

But what happens when these differences are difficult to understand and interfere with a child's ability to learn and negotiate his or her world?

Here are five areas where children's behaviors may demonstrate underlying learning or sensory differences that create barriers to social and academic progress. Children who demonstrate difficulty in several or all of these areas may be Complex Learners, requiring systematic, individualized programs to support their engagement with learning.

### **1** Routines

Getting up and out of bed and ready to face the day is very challenging. Equally difficult may be a bedtime routine that allows for consistent and proper sleep. At the same time, interruption of daily routine creates discomfort, anxiety, and behavior issues. Transitions between one activity and the next, introducing new people, and changing plans can all spark resistance and may even lead to "meltdowns."

### **2** Friends

Children may not get invited to play dates or birthday parties, or may be frequently teased, even bullied. Not understanding the rules of games, talking too loudly or too quietly, misinterpreting social cues and exhibiting poor conflict resolution and coping strategies make it very hard to initiate and maintain friendships. Children may interrupt, display frustration, and generally "wear people down," or they may retreat and become extremely shy and unresponsive.

### **3** Self-care

Bathing, combing hair, brushing teeth, and getting dressed create conflict and resistance. Children may be particularly bothered by the texture of a sweater, how certain socks feel, or a tag at the back of a shirt. They may be very sensitive to temperature, often feeling too hot or too cold. Children may also have an intense aversion to certain foods based on smell or texture, and be very picky eaters.

### **4** Organization

Initiating and completing tasks seems overwhelming, so there may be a lot of struggles with homework and household chores. Children may have very messy bedrooms, closets, and lockers. Following directions is problematic, and children have trouble remembering more than one direction at a time or remembering the order of a sequence of tasks. They may have trouble with focus, and get distracted by noise and visual information.

### **5** Academics

Reading, math and writing can all present significant challenges for Complex Learners. They may have trouble with specific concepts such as sounding out words, sequencing numbers, or understanding spelling rules. In addition, there may be more general problems with retrieval and articulation of information. As a result, children may perform below grade level, or have gaps in their understanding and knowledge base.

Complex Learners may be anxious, distractible, rigid, loud, or shy, but they are also creative, clever, funny, passionate, and persistent. Our work as parents and educators is to understand more about how they are "wired" and what supports will help them achieve their educational potential. ■

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*Anna Johnson is Head of School at The Wolf School in East Providence, which provides education to Complex Learners.*