Reluctant Writers in School

Some autistic learners find the process of writing difficult. When this occurs, we need to consider the skills and thought processes that are required to be successful in writing.

The writing process is composed of three main processes:

(1) the planning process, directed to prepare the content of the text by retrieving ideas from memory and organising them;

(2) the translation process, which includes the grammatical and orthographical encoding, and the motor execution actions involved in handwriting; and

(3) the revision process that allows writers to compare the written product with their mental representation of the intended text.

Hayes and Flower (1980) and Hayes (2006)

Writing also requires different parts of the brain to communicate including the parts of the brain that control:

- Motor Control
- Language Skills
- Sensory Feedback
- Problem solving
- Imitation Skills
- Memory
- Organisation
- Proprioception

The Three Areas of Difference

Communication and Interaction

- Difficulty interpreting emotions and feelings- children with autism may not be able to write about the feelings/intentions of characters or themselves
- Literal Understanding- this can affect how they understand instructions in writing tasks or questions to answer
- Limited expressive language and vocabulary- which can limit how much they are able to write and understand. This can include following instructions and directions, how much they follow in a lesson and knowing what is expected of them in a task. Their ability to be expressive in their writing can be limited due to not finding the words or been able to sequence their sentences and ideas.
- Differences in comprehension- if they do not understand the story or theme, they may not be able to write about it in their own words. Although they may be able to read, it does not mean they can give their own ideas or understand the flow of a story.

Processing and Flexibility

- Rigid thinking and wanting to write about what they like- if they are not interested in a topic, they may struggle to see why they need to write about it.

- Monotropic- their minds tend to have their minds focused on a small number of interests at any given time leaving them little resources to focus on other things to focus on.
- Open ended writing tasks- children with autism may struggle to know how much to write, what to write about, what areas to cover.
- Organisational/executive functioning skills- this includes needing to recognise letters/words and write them in sequence, plan for what comes next, organise thoughts and stay on topic. It also requires the skills to know where to start, break down a task, follow multi-step instructions and think for themselves.
- Too many demands- if all the above are difficult for children with autism, then the simplest of demands can be overwhelming, causing reluctance to engage, avoidance or distraction techniques to avoid the task.

Sensory

Writing requires a child to sit when they may struggle to sit, fine motor control which may be impacted by their sensory differences, the seats may be uncomfortable for them, they may struggle to touch the paper, or hear the noise of a pencil moving across the paper or their visual differences may impact on their ability to see and read the words or the paper may be too bright.

Strategies to Support

- Sensory warm up- run an errand, pass out books, fidget toys, reduce auditory input, allow them to stand to write, think about where they sit, practical movement activities, exercises to get the body moving.
- Now and next- write a bit then a sensory activity for a few minutes.
- A visual scaffold to take away uncertainty and to provide a structure to the task.
- A visual flow chart to prompt ideas and sentences
- Simple task boards and structures
- A visual showing how much is needed to be written
- Use timers to break down a task
- Allow them to write about their interests
- Explore Software strategies that enable Talking to writing strategies
- Use Graphic Organisers
- Mind Maps
- Cause and Effect Charts
- Task Boards
- Adapted equipment- pencils grips
- Checklist for what equipment is needed or have all the resources on their desk in an individual pencil case.
- Colourful Semantics
- Editing Checklists

If you require further information speak to your CAT worker.