

Teacher techniques to improve focus in special needs kids

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On Monday, Meenakshi Kulkarni, a special educator at Madras Seva Sadan Trust, learned a technique — the “10-minute work, 10-minute break” approach — that she believes will completely change the way she teaches children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

“The biggest challenge with ADHD is getting students to sit patiently or even focus in class,” says Meenakshi, who learned the techniques at a five-day programme organised by Chennai Volunteers in collaboration with Portobello Institute, Ireland. The no-cost programme trains special needs educators and teachers to use sports to improve focus in neurodivergent students, especially those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

“The exercises we learned are adaptable and can be used with children on wheelchairs or with limited mobility, using whatever furniture is available. During breaks, students do sit-ups, squats, and other exercises to release their pent-up restlessness. This not only has physical benefits but also calms them,” says Meenakshi.

Meanwhile, Jayashree L V, director of the Spastic Society of Tamil Nadu, learned how creating a routine in activities can reduce anxiety and improve concentration in children with ASD.

“In Chennai, intellectual disabilities are common, and students with dyslexia or ADHD are often mislabelled as slow,” says Rinku Mecheri, founder of Chennai Volunteers. “These students

need to be taught at their own pace. After surveying 15 special needs schools and several nonprofits to understand the challenges, we put together a programme taught by nine professors from Ireland who specialise in inclusive early intervention and child protection. We want the teachers to apply what they learn and pass it on to their peers.”

It is important to understand the child’s background, as many underprivileged children are subjected to domestic violence, sexual abuse and alcoholism, says Denise Flood, college director at Portobello Institute Ireland. “This gives out a trauma response, which sometimes exhibits ADD and ASD symptoms. For example, they may have violent outbursts, become non-verbal, seem withdrawn, and sometimes try seeking control at school. We have a session called ‘Trauma informed practice when working with children and adults’ for educators to understand the child.”

Teachers are also taught how to help the students overcome meltdowns. “It’s okay for children to have a bad day. We aim to make the child independent enough to deal with meltdowns without relying entirely on their teacher or parent to get through it,” says Denise.

A self-defence session is part of the programme to discuss how essential it is for children to protect themselves.

Chennai Volunteers is planning to take the programme online.

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LESSON PLAN: Teachers learn techniques for neurodivergent classroom at the workshop in Chennai