

# ABOUT CHRONIC PAIN AND LEARNING



Chronic pain such as daily headache, stomach aches and on-going joint pain is long term pain that persists. It is common in children and adolescence, affecting one in five. When there is chronic pain the stress, neural and immune systems are in a highly alert state and so sounds in the classroom, a tap on the shoulder or simple activities may be interpreted as a danger signal where the pain intensity increases.

Many things contribute to chronic pain including thoughts, feelings, stress levels, sleep quality, past experiences, genetics, mood, family dynamics and culture.

Each learner living with chronic pain is a unique individual. Those who support learners with chronic pain should make adjustments to their learning and environment tailored to their needs.

See the online practice guides to find out more:

[edi.sa.edu.au/practiceguidance](https://edi.sa.edu.au/practiceguidance)



**Government  
of South Australia**

Department for Education

## Understanding Chronic Pain and learning

Defined as 2 types:

1. Chronic primary pain that has been present or recurred frequently for 3 months or more with no underlying cause.
2. Chronic secondary pain symptomatic of an underlying condition present for 3 months or more.

Chronic primary pain is believed to arise from the dysregulation of our protective systems such as the nervous system, immune system and the stress/gut system. The system can become overprotective at times, responding to non-harmful input.

Pain is fatiguing and intrusive, interfering with concentration and focus making learning difficult. The natural course of chronic pain varies and particularly chronic pain that occurs during adolescence must be managed sensitively so that the learner does not feel different than their peers. This is pivotal to the way the adjustments are implemented.

## Medications

Medication is only used in conjunction with other strategies such as self-regulation and are used on a short-term basis. There may be side effects that impact learning. Chronic pain benefits from strategies that lessen activity in the nervous, immune or stress systems, such as fun activities, having a safe space to withdraw to, using favourite or pleasant imagery or smells, tuning out with creative activities and being in nature.

## Strengths of Learners with chronic pain

These strengths may include:

- they are more resilient
- they develop excellent active coping strategies
- they may learn how to advocate for themselves and others
- they may mature more quickly

# CHRONIC PAIN AND LEARNING ADJUSTMENTS

## EXAMPLES OF ADJUSTMENTS



### Preschool Adjustments

- Consider learners special interests and preferred activities and make them available upon arrival and throughout the day.
- Set up the opportunity to 'check in' with the learner and their parent/carer then adjust the learning schedule for the day.
- Learning requiring a higher cognitive load should be presented when the learner is fresh with the maximum availability for the requirements of the learning process.



### Primary school Adjustments

- Consider how the learner copes with breaktimes as the unstructured time may require sensitive management. Consider alternative activities with peer interaction.
- With the learner and family, look over the timetable and seek input to maximize engagement.
- Provide a 'break card' to allow the learner a short break from the class for an agreed time.



### High school Adjustments

- Consider the distance between lessons and minimise where possible to reduce fatigue.
- Make subject requirements clear and ensure family is aware of progress of learner. Pace of the learning may need to be adjusted when pain is not under control.
- All teachers must be aware and work together to ensure all assignments are not due at the same time.
- When planning SACE an application for special provisions can be made under the heading of pain which is a medical condition.



### Leaders Role

The attitude of the leader sets the tone and attitude of the whole school or preschool. A positive accepting attitude in the whole learning community is essential for the successful inclusion of learners with additional needs, including those with chronic pain.