

Senior secondary school

# Learning curve: education and socialisation after childhood cancer

For parents and teachers to share with young people

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An information booklet for parents and teachers to share with young people  
Senior secondary school  
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Paediatric Integrated Cancer Service

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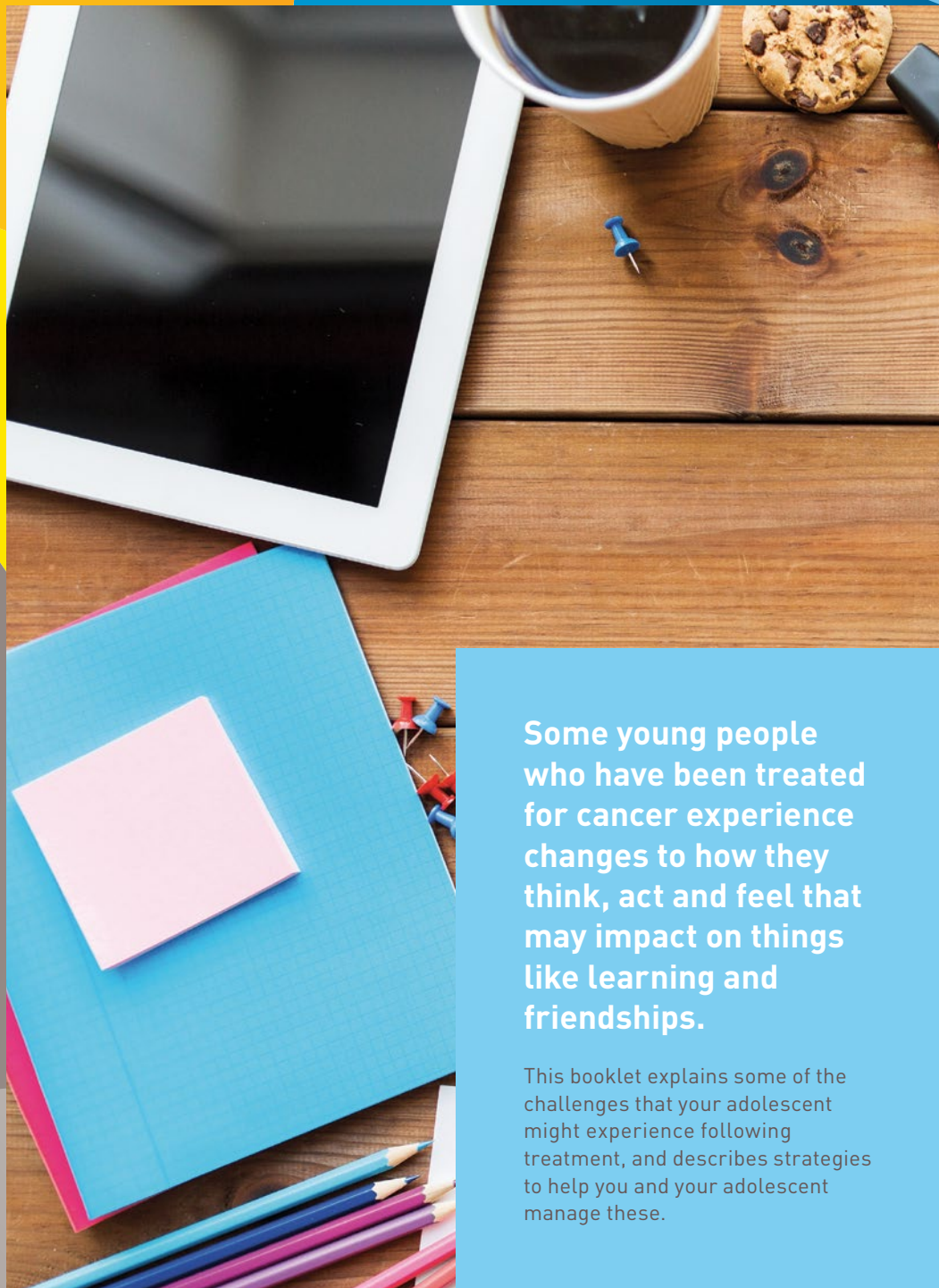
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The quotations throughout this information booklet are taken directly from young people, parents and families affected by childhood cancer. The PICS thanks them for their permission to use these quotations and for sharing their experiences.



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**Some young people who have been treated for cancer experience changes to how they think, act and feel that may impact on things like learning and friendships.**

This booklet explains some of the challenges that your adolescent might experience following treatment, and describes strategies to help you and your adolescent manage these.

## Introduction

**Cancer brings many challenges to young people and their families. The disruption caused to normal life processes can result in short- and long-term changes that may alter thinking, behaviour and emotional skills. Some of these changes may be of benefit, such as a more mature or positive approach to relationships, while other changes may present challenges, like struggling to complete assignments on time or managing school timetables.**

'Cognitive late effects' is the term used to describe the difficulties in thinking skills that can occur following treatment for cancer. While these difficulties are usually mild and only affect a small number of young people, they can have an impact on academic achievement and social participation. Some young people will therefore require additional support and assistance from parents, teachers or health professionals to meet their full potential.

This booklet is designed to be a general reference guide to help identify and address the thinking, learning, behavioural and emotional difficulties that your adolescent may experience following treatment for cancer. Everyone is unique, and the issues discussed in this booklet may not be a problem for your adolescent. If you are concerned about your adolescent's thinking skills, behaviour or emotional wellbeing please discuss this with their doctor in order to access appropriate support.

# Learning is a complicated business

The way we learn is affected by our experiences and how our brain is developing. Cancer and how cancer is treated can interrupt both of these processes. The types of difficulty with thinking skills and behaviour that may arise following treatment will depend on the learning stage a person has reached prior to their cancer diagnosis and the length and intensity of their illness and treatment.



It is important to remember that a number of other factors can also affect how a person learns and may result in fluctuations in how they perform day to day. These may include:

- tiredness (such as physical or mental fatigue)
- sensory difficulties (such as hearing or vision loss and motor impairment)
- emotional difficulties (such as confidence, sadness or high levels of worry or stress).

Impairments in physical, sensory or emotional areas can often appear the same as the thinking difficulties described in this information booklet. Young people who have been treated for cancer are at increased risk of problems in these areas as a result of their treatment. It is therefore important to have these impairments assessed if your adolescent is experiencing any issues at school or in their relationships with friends or family, and you believe that these difficulties may be contributing to any problems with learning or social participation.

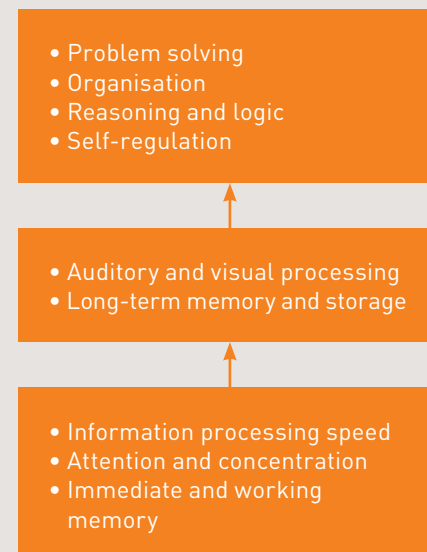
The diagram to the right shows some of the key thinking skills required to process and learn new information. Abilities that typically develop at an early age include being able to concentrate, take in information quickly and hold information in the memory. These skills are important for the development of more complex abilities like planning, organising and problem solving, which mature during adolescence and early adulthood.

Some young people who have undergone treatment for cancer experience difficulties in one or multiple thinking skills, which may

affect how well they perform in comparison with their peers. As a general rule, a person will not lose skills they acquired before cancer and its treatment but may have difficulty developing new skills.

For example, a young person who became ill at age 12 and has already mastered early literacy skills (such as reading comprehension and story writing) will not lose these abilities but may experience difficulty with new or developing skills such as critically analysing texts and organising ideas to write an essay.

## Learning processes



## Skill set (IQ)

## Functional outcomes

# Learning styles and why they matter

Learning styles vary from person to person. We all have strengths and weaknesses in our thinking skills, regardless of our medical history. For example, academic-based tasks come naturally for some people, while for others a bit of extra effort is required. Some of us are good at language or literacy tasks, while others are better at visual or hands-on activities.

Understanding your adolescent's learning style can help you choose the right strategies for dealing with any issues they might experience in relation to thinking skills or relationships at school. It is important to remember that no matter who we are or what our experiences have been, there will always be other people for whom certain things come more easily than they do for us, as well as those people for whom they are more difficult. Rather than comparing your adolescent's performance with that of others, comparing their own progress over time is the best way to measure success. Talking to your

adolescent and their teachers about setting realistic goals, as well as how to address tasks in ways that draw on strengths and adjust for any weaknesses or difficulties, will help them work towards success and enjoy learning.

**Useful questions to ask yourself when considering if your adolescent may have difficulty with certain thinking skills are:**

- Do they have trouble following instructions or remembering information on a daily basis?
- Do they struggle to keep up in class and can't seem to get their assignments in on time?
- Are they forgetful and disorganised?
- Do they seem to feel and react differently to things than their friends?

# Cognitive late effects: What are they and what do they look like?

Cancer and its treatment affect young people in different ways. 'Cognitive late effects' is the term used to describe the difficulties in thinking skills that can occur following treatment for cancer. While changes can occur in a variety of areas, certain types of thinking and behavioural difficulties are more common following cancer treatment.

Cognitive late effects often include difficulty with:

- information processing speed
- attention and concentration
- memory
- executive functions (such as planning, organising and monitoring behaviours).

As shown in the diagram on page 9, these skills contribute to the learning process by allowing you to attend to, filter, adjust, process, recall and update new information. Some young people who have had cancer will therefore need to put in more effort and time to learn new skills. In general, these difficulties are not restricted to learning a

particular type of material such as mathematics. Rather, they will become evident in whatever skill a person is developing at the time. So a young person who is at the stage of learning trigonometry might initially require repetition, clarification and extra time to complete these tasks, and may find some concepts difficult to master.

It is important to note that while some young people who have been treated for cancer may require extra support and alternative strategies to learn a new skill, most will be able to maintain an appropriate skill set for their age. That is, their intellectual level (such as their IQ) and general functioning will usually be age-appropriate. There will be a very small number of young people at risk of reduced intellectual function and significant academic difficulties.



While cognitive late effects may develop at any stage during or after cancer treatment, they are more often seen in the months to years following treatment.

**It is important to note that not all young people who have had cancer will experience these types of difficulties.**

The remaining sections of this booklet will provide information and strategies for helping young people who experience difficulties with thinking and learning following treatment for cancer.

## Information processing skills

**Challenges in how your adolescent processes or interprets information can present in many ways following cancer and its treatment. These may include:**

- difficulty completing activities within the time provided
- missing part of an instruction
- needing information repeated
- struggling to copy large amounts of material from the whiteboard
- being slow to respond during conversations with others
- difficulty keeping up in discussions or games
- becoming easily overwhelmed by tasks and responding with frustration or disinterest.

Information processing refers to the ability to take in and manage the information collected by our senses. When we talk about information processing we usually refer to the speed at which a person can process information.

Information processing speed is important for all forms of thought because it affects the amount and quality of the information a person can manage at any one time. As young people get older, their information processing speed gets quicker. Part of this increased efficiency is due to improvements in attention skills that allow a person to focus more effectively on what is important while filtering out other less important information.

Slowed information processing speed can mean that it takes your adolescent longer to learn new skills and complete work tasks. Some simple strategies can help them organise and take in information more efficiently and reduce the confusion and frustration they might sometimes experience.

**'I am always behind the rest of the class and can never seem to get things done on time.'**

– Melanie, 15-year-old survivor of acute lymphoblastic leukaemia

### Strategies for dealing with information processing difficulties

1. Encourage your adolescent to learn how to focus on key points in conversations or discussions. This involves paying particular attention to names, times or dates, and jotting these down so that they can fill in the gaps later by asking questions or doing a bit of their own research.
2. Written instructions are great as a reference point. Most teachers jot down information on the whiteboard during lessons; however, if your adolescent requires more information, suggest they ask their teachers to write dot-point instructions on the board, particularly when they are describing a new task.
3. If your adolescent has trouble taking in information quickly, the most helpful thing for other people to do is to give information slowly and repeat it if needed. Most people will do this happily if asked.
4. Your adolescent might benefit from having activities broken down into short step-by-step instructions. Ask their teachers to provide key points rather than lengthy descriptions when discussing work tasks, and to keep instructions clear and brief.
5. Suggest they develop routines for common activities. When they are familiar with the sequence of steps involved in an activity, they will be better able to focus on the specifics of the task at hand without having to carefully process all the information provided. Having a homework routine might be particularly useful during the senior school years when the demands on their time are greater.
6. Your adolescent might find it particularly difficult to get work done under time constraints. Encourage them to speak to their teachers about having fewer items on worksheets or breaking up their workload so they can take home tasks they have been unable to complete during class time.
7. Encourage your adolescent to use the voice or video recorder function on their mobile phone or tablet to record long discussions or lessons to review at a later time. This may be particularly useful for exam revision or when their teacher is discussing a new assessment task. Remember to make sure they ask permission if they are going to record a lesson.

8. If your adolescent is slow at copying information, suggest they ask their teachers for handouts (written summaries of class work and homework tasks) or permission to take photos of the board with their phone or tablet to help speed up their work. Photocopying a friend's notes is another alternative that can be particularly helpful for study notes or exam revision.
9. Your adolescent might find it difficult to write or type lengthy essays and assignments (or emails and Facebook updates!), particularly when they need to put in extra effort to process and organise information. Speech recognition software can be used to dictate information. Many word processors have built-in programs for this, while some schools also provide access to more specialised voice recognition programs.
10. Visual aids, like flowcharts or maps, can help them keep track of conversations and topics when they might miss bits of information.  
*Example: In the classroom when discussing a novel, suggest they draw an information tree to help keep track of the characters and their relationships. They can label each of the key characters with one of their defining features. Lines can then be used to connect*

*the characters in groups or families. This information can help your adolescent keep track of lengthy classroom discussions.*

11. Encourage your adolescent to discuss modifications with their teachers for timed, exam-style assessment tasks. Being allowed to use a computer or write dot-point answers rather than paragraphed responses, and being given extra reading time or using a scribe may assist with completing the task to the best of their ability within the timeframe provided. It is important that your adolescent discusses these options with their teachers well before the time when their assessment tasks are due.

## Attention and concentration difficulties

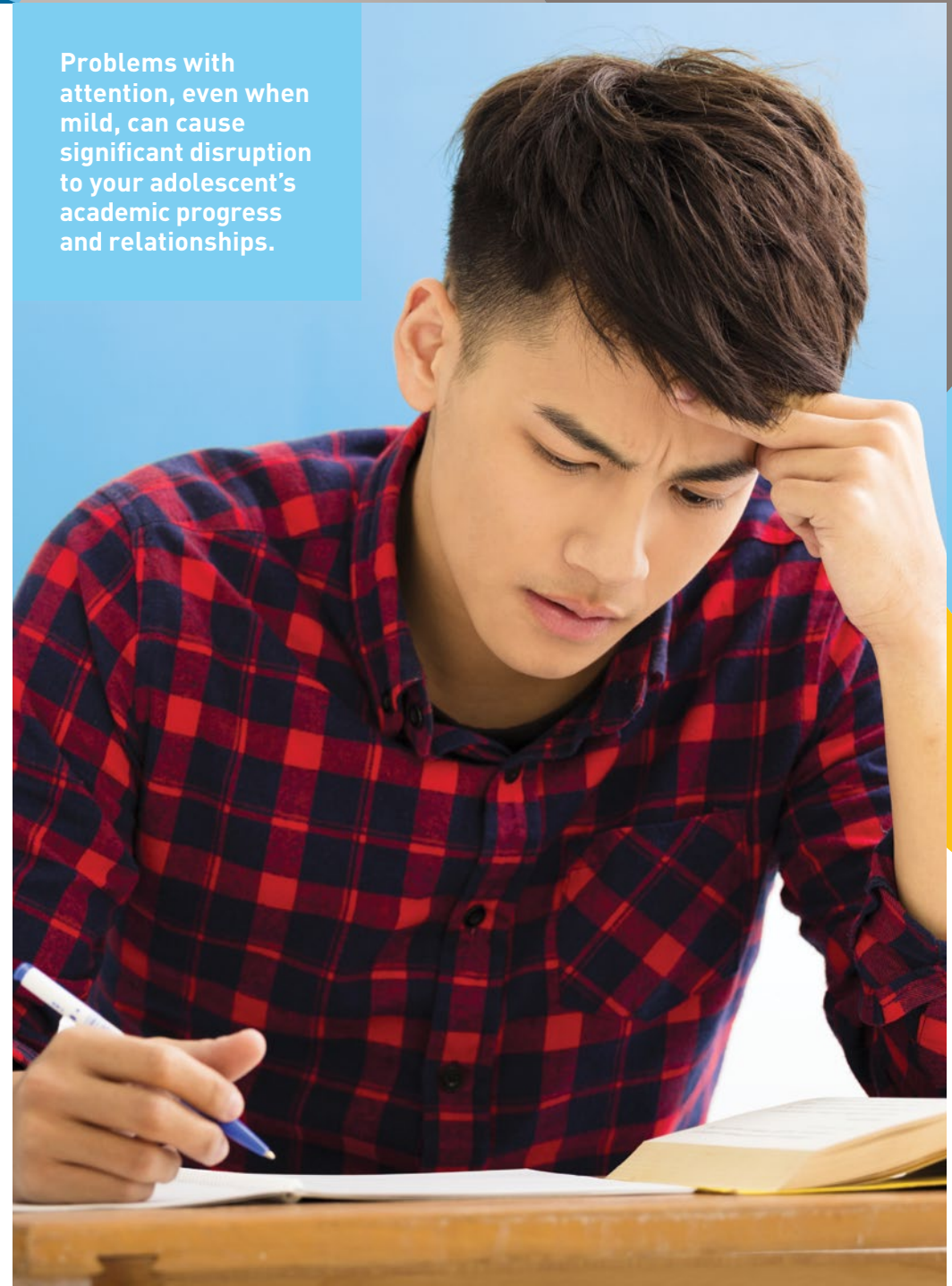
Being able to focus attention on important information and maintain concentration for long enough to complete tasks are skills that affect all forms of thought and learning for people of all ages. Problems with attention, even when mild, can cause significant disruption to your adolescent's academic progress and

relationships. Difficulty focusing and concentrating on information can occur for different reasons. For example, if your adolescent is slow at processing information they may become overloaded quite quickly and disengage from activities, thus appearing to be inattentive. Because these skills are closely related, the strategies your adolescent might use to target these problems are generally the same.

### Attention problems for young people following cancer and its treatment may include:

- difficulty focusing in a busy environment
- being easily distracted by noise, objects or information unrelated to the task at hand
- trouble identifying important items on a busy whiteboard or page
- constantly moving from one task to another without completing any correctly
- frequently talking off-topic (such as making comments that are unrelated to the conversation)
- speaking at inappropriate times or making inappropriate comments (such as talking without thinking)
- being unable to repeat instructions
- feeling fidgety, impatient or restless
- difficulty dealing with more than one activity at a time (such as listening to the teacher while copying information from the board)
- frequently forgetting to bring home work or school books
- being described by others as 'vague' or 'off with the fairies'.

Problems with attention, even when mild, can cause significant disruption to your adolescent's academic progress and relationships.



### Strategies for dealing with attention and concentration difficulties

1. Suggest your adolescent develops a work schedule to keep them on track during study sessions. This should list all tasks they need to complete, with time limits for each activity. They can organise work tasks into 20–30 minute blocks with a five-minute break in between. They might benefit from the assistance of a teacher or parent to develop a work plan for assessment tasks.
2. At home, having a clean workspace that is free from distractions (such as TV, music or their phone) is important. At school, working in the library during free periods or when completing assessment tasks can improve concentration.
3. Suggest your adolescent sits close to the source of information (such as their teacher, whiteboard or TV screen) to avoid becoming distracted by other objects or people in the way.
4. Make sure your adolescent has all the resources they need to complete their work before they start. Suggest they check off completed tasks from their list and reward themselves at the end of a lengthy session.
5. Encourage your adolescent to focus on completing one activity at a time, rather than trying to juggle multiple tasks at once. For example, if someone is trying to talk to them while they are doing their homework they are more likely to make mistakes and take longer to complete the activity.
6. Suggest your adolescent uses highlighters, asterisks, bolding or an italicised font to draw their attention to important items in their notes. Suggest they avoid using paper with decoration on it as this can be distracting. They can also discuss this with their teachers in regard to worksheets or assessment task summaries.
7. Your adolescent might become physically restless after a lengthy activity. When possible, suggest they get up and have a stretch or walk, or spend a few minutes doing something they particularly enjoy (such as drawing) as a way to wind down and restore their motivation for the next task. Encourage them to set a reminder on their phone or use an alarm to alert them to when it is time to return to work.
8. Make sure your adolescent has a folder or bag that they bring to every class. They can routinely use this folder or bag for their homework tasks and books that need to come home. Also, suggest they add their

homework tasks to a 'to-do' list on their phone or diary with a reminder set for home time.

9. When studying for exams or working on assessment tasks, help your adolescent to schedule more effortful activities at the beginning of the day. Ensure they have a proper break for lunch and get in some physical activity to help reboot their attention span.
10. Remind your adolescent that it is more important to be accurate in their work than quick. It is good practice for them to check over their work for mistakes or missed items before moving on to another task.

### Working memory difficulties

Working memory refers to the ability to hold and work with information in your head. It requires the short-term storage of items for mental manipulation and is often referred to as a 'mental notepad'. That is, it is where you keep information while you are working on it, like when you are trying to calculate how much your grocery shopping will cost and how much change you will have, or when you need to hold onto a contact number in your head until you can write it down or enter it into your phone. Working memory is also necessary for the continuous tracking of conversations for details and

actions that we use to update our own behaviour and verbal responses.

Working memory problems for young people following cancer and its treatment may include:

- difficulty following more than one or two instructions and often missing bits of information
- being easily confused about the order of steps in an activity
- trouble learning new names or remembering phone numbers
- finding mental calculations particularly challenging (such as adding up the cost of items in your head when shopping and working out how much change you will have)
- difficulty following the plot in lengthy stories or movies
- forgetting where they put things
- difficulty with wayfinding (such as easily getting lost in new environments)
- struggling with dictation tasks and copying large amounts of information from the board.



Visual prompts, concrete aides and a notepad should be used whenever possible to help perform calculations.

### Strategies for dealing with working memory difficulties

1. Encourage your adolescent to write things down! If the notepad in their head cannot hold all the information they need to complete an activity, having it written on a physical notepad will be a great help. Encourage them to get into the habit of recording instructions, jotting down ideas and working problems out on paper to avoid forgetting information or making mistakes.
2. A reminder checklist can be used to help your adolescent manage daily routines such as preparing for school or organising their things for exams.
3. Suggest your adolescent uses a calculator when they go shopping to help them keep track of what they are purchasing.
4. A diary will be crucial to how your adolescent manages their homework, assessment tasks and study schedules. They might

need a reminder to check their diary at the beginning and end of each class, and at night when doing their homework. Suggest they use the diary on their phone to set reminders or to take photos of information or pictures they need to remember.

5. Visual prompts, concrete aides and a notepad should be used whenever possible to help perform calculations.
6. Have a place at home where your adolescent can leave their important belongings such as keys or school bag. Ensure they place these items where they belong as soon as they get home so they are ready to be collected when they head off to school or work.
7. Your adolescent's mobile phone should be their best friend. Their phone can record a large amount of information in the form of notes, photos and reminders, and they can rely on the calculator and alarm functions. Encourage them to use it to help with daily tasks, but beware that it does not become a distraction.
8. 'Chunking' is a particularly helpful strategy to learn to reduce the burden on their memory system.  
*Example: When trying to remember a phone number, suggest they group the numbers*

*into pairs (91827364 into 91-82-73-64). This means only four numbers need to be remembered rather than eight.*

9. Mnemonic strategies can also help improve recall of information and can also be fun. *Example: The mnemonic TELL can help them remember how to set out their essay. It stands for **T**opic sentence, **E**xpand, **L**ots of evidence and **L**ink.*
10. A very useful guide to working memory difficulties can be found at: <[www.york.ac.uk/res/wml/Classroom%20guide.pdf](http://www.york.ac.uk/res/wml/Classroom%20guide.pdf)>.

### Executive functions

Executive functions include:

- planning
- organising
- self-regulation
- problem solving.

Executive functions are the skills responsible for controlling and managing other cognitive skills and behaviours. Executive difficulties can look quite different from individual to individual because there are many aspects to executive functions that develop at different ages.

**Some common examples of executive function problems that may result from cancer and its treatment include:**

- leaving things to the last minute and then being unable to complete tasks properly because they run out of time or don't have the right tools available
- an untidy and disorganised bedroom or locker, which leads to trouble locating what they need, often being late to class or leaving the house
- regularly bringing the wrong books to class or forgetting to wear sports clothes on sports day
- forgetting appointments or dates with friends
- losing track of time when out
- finding the plot or ideas in essays and projects disjointed and difficult to follow
- finding it hard to think up different ways to solve a problem and often giving up if their first attempt or strategy fails
- often behaving in inappropriate ways or saying inappropriate things
- difficulty getting started on tasks or knowing when to stop
- struggling to understand abstract or theoretical concepts
- finding it hard to generalise skills to new situations.

**Strategies for dealing with executive function difficulties**

1. Encourage your adolescent to develop routines! Well-learned routines for everyday tasks will help them better organise their work and minimise time loss.
2. Suggest your adolescent designs a homework schedule. They might find it helpful to include you in this process. Make sure there are clear goals and priorities for all activities and that it notes when and where the work will get done. You or their teacher might assist with identifying how long tasks will take to complete and how best to approach tasks.
3. A diary is the best way to organise a work schedule for activities. It works as a reminder and also a time management system. Suggest your adolescent has a 'to-do' list that can be moved from day to day, and set a reminder on their phone to prompt them to check their diary in the morning and evening.

4. Suggest your adolescent brainstorms ideas for assessment tasks, essays and stories. This might be done with a study group, friend, parent, teacher or tutor. Suggest they write their ideas down on sticky notes or on their computer and then discuss them with you or a friend to organise these into a logical structure.
5. Planning sheets are a great way to help work out the best approach for tackling tasks. For example, a planning sheet for story or essay writing would have boxes with headings and prompts for each of the elements required in an appropriate order. They would fill the sheet out as an initial draft and then discuss it with their teacher before commencing a full draft of the task.
6. It is very useful to have a duplicate set of textbooks or DVDs at home in case they forget to bring home the right books for homework and assessment tasks.
7. You may find that your adolescent sometimes speaks their mind without clearly thinking through the consequences. This might particularly be the case when they are excited about the topic of conversation or just keen to contribute to a discussion with friends. Encourage your adolescent to practise slowing down their responses to give

them time to think about how suitable and true to their intended meaning they are. They can do this with you or a friend. Organise a time to have an uninterrupted conversation and encourage them to make a conscious effort to practise these steps: 'stop', 'review' then 'speak'.

8. Some young people find colour-coding their timetable a great time saver to help with transitioning between classes. Despite this strategy your adolescent might find that they still require extra time to get from class to class. Encourage them to discuss this with their teachers so their teachers are aware that their tardiness is not due to lack of effort.  
*Example: Suggest they highlight all mathematics periods in the timetable in red and put a dot or strip on their mathematics text so they can quickly identify them in their locker. Some young people find it even easier if they have a coloured tote bag for each subject that is colour-matched to their timetable. So in this case they would have a red cloth bag for their maths books that they can bring to class and then return with the texts to their locker at the end of the period. This is efficient and ensures they don't forget things.*

# Academic achievement following cancer

The cognitive late effects described in this booklet can affect new learning. Young people are learning new things all the time, so even mild difficulties can have an impact on academic performance. Your adolescent may also have missed a lot of school because they were too unwell or had to frequently go to hospital. This may have resulted in gaps in their knowledge base – that is, missing 'building blocks' that are necessary for academic progress.

Slow academic progress following treatment for cancer is a major frustration for young people and is often difficult for parents and teachers to fully understand. Tiredness, emotional issues and sensory issues resulting from cancer and its treatment can make learning harder and play a role in slowed progress.

Understanding their learning style will help you and your adolescent map out an individual learning plan with their teachers and year-level coordinator. This should include a set of strategies to compensate for their unique set of difficulties. While many strategies have been described in this booklet, it is best to identify and try a handful of

strategies at a time to see what works best for the individual. If your adolescent has a strategy they have developed that they find particularly helpful, it is worth discussing this with their teachers.

The following support websites may also be of use:

- For a student support website for Years 11 and 12 visit <[www.studentbox.com.au](http://www.studentbox.com.au)>.
- For study notes and a senior schooling support community visit <[www.sparknotes.com](http://www.sparknotes.com)>.
- For study skills from the State Library of Victoria visit <<http://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au/learn-skills/study-skills>>.
- For VCE guides and support visit <[www.vcehelp.com.au/category/vce-study-skills](http://www.vcehelp.com.au/category/vce-study-skills)>.
- For past curriculum guides and exam papers visit <[www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Pages/index.aspx](http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Pages/index.aspx)>.

There are a number of other general strategies that are useful in the academic environment. In discussion with their teachers, it may be useful to discuss the following.

1. Setting up an individual learning plan that documents your adolescent's learning strengths and weaknesses. This would include setting out some key strategies that help them better access and participate in school activities.
2. Structure, routine and providing step-by-step instructions are important for all types of challenges that students face. Discuss the possibility of having instructions placed on the board, routines written out as prompts in appropriate places and visual aids to help them keep track of lengthy class sessions.
3. Modifications to lesson plans can be particularly helpful if your adolescent finds it a struggle to keep up with the amount of work set in class. A reduced workload, extended time to complete activities, assistance from a helper or class assistant (when available) and visual or

concrete aids will help most individuals. Recorded class sessions and computerised text can also be useful.

4. Test situations are particularly challenging for young people with slowed learning. Providing extra time, oral instead of written exams, a scribe, use of a computer or cheat sheets can be discussed with the school. Depending on the type of task being assessed some of these compensatory strategies may not be allowed.
5. Your adolescent may be eligible for tutoring through various programs such as the Ronald McDonald Learning Program (RMLP). A referral can be made by a parent, teacher, doctor or other staff member via the website at <[www.learningprogram.rmhc.org.au/index.php](http://www.learningprogram.rmhc.org.au/index.php)>.

# Other late effects

As indicated previously, a range of factors can influence a young person's learning and academic performance. In addition to cognitive late effects, adolescents who have been treated for cancer may have other effects of treatment that need to be considered when trying to optimise their potential for learning and overall quality of life. The information in the following sections includes some factors that may apply to your adolescent's situation.

## Fatigue or persistent tiredness

### Physical fatigue

For some young people, persistent physical fatigue or tiredness can be present long after treatment has finished. This tiredness can be the result of physical changes that have taken place because of their illness or treatment. Physical fatigue is generally easy to spot and is usually accompanied by some form of physical impairment (such as slower handwriting or changes to how your adolescent walks or moves). Simple strategies to reduce the amount of physical activity required at school will help with energy levels.

### Strategies for dealing with physical fatigue

1. Encourage your adolescent to ask their teachers for handouts of information provided in class or permission to take photos of what has been written on the board.
2. Your adolescent might require modification of physical education or sports activities. Encourage them to speak with their teachers about options such as exemption from high-intensity sports or assignment to other duties (such as refereeing sports games, scoring or rest periods).
3. Suggest your adolescent ask for a locker that is close to their homeroom.
4. Have a set of textbooks at home and one at school. This will reduce the weight of their schoolbag.

### Mental fatigue

Your adolescent may also experience mental fatigue, which is often harder to describe and identify. If they suffer from cognitive late effects, mental fatigue can result from the extra effort required for them to perform some tasks or activities. Mental fatigue affects the ability to focus and sustain attention, and to

process and recall information. As a result, your adolescent may be at risk of missing or losing information due to tiredness, and might seem irritable, restless or teary at times. Young people with mental fatigue might also find it frustrating if people mistake their behaviour for laziness or a lack of motivation.

If your adolescent is suffering from mental fatigue you may find they are exhausted by the end of the school day and struggle to focus on homework. Excessive mental fatigue can have a substantial impact on academic progress and may also affect their relationships.

### Strategies for dealing with mental fatigue

1. Powernaps after school for 20–30 minutes can help your adolescent 'reboot' before starting their homework.
2. A change can be as good as a rest! Encourage them to change activities every 30–40 minutes to keep 'zoning out' to a minimum. Make sure they get up and stretch or take a brief walk. Listening to music or reading a magazine for a short period might also help them regain some energy.
3. Short breaks throughout the day are necessary to recharge their batteries. Encourage your adolescent to discuss the possibility of rest breaks with

their teacher. They may occasionally find that they need a catnap in the 'sick bay' or another quiet area on days when they feel particularly exhausted.

### Emotional difficulties

The emotional impact of cancer and its treatment can be significant and can affect young people in a range of ways, such as difficulty getting motivated to do things they previously enjoyed, feeling overwhelmed with worry and stress, or finding it difficult to connect with friends and participate in conversations about things that are important to them. This can occur for many reasons including the stress of hospitalisation and cancer treatment itself, having their normal activities disrupted and spending long periods away from their friends, as well as the strains on family relationships that commonly occur when a child or young person is diagnosed with cancer.

Your adolescent might have trouble finding the words to describe how they feel, or think that the adults around them are making a fuss about them and they can't understand why.

It is important to remember that not everyone experiences these difficulties, and that those who do usually improve with some extra support (such as from parents, teachers or a health professional). If you feel any of these problems are

affecting how your adolescent is able to function at home or school, is it important that you encourage them to discuss this with you or an adult who they feel comfortable with and who will be able to help them get the right support.

### Strategies for dealing with emotional difficulties

1. It might be easier for your adolescent to write about how they feel rather than speaking with someone directly. If this is the case, suggest they keep a diary where they can 'debrief' about their day, and perhaps use this as a way to start a conversation with someone about their situation.
2. Encourage your adolescent to talk to someone – you, a friend, a teacher, a counsellor or anyone who they feel comfortable with. Discussing how they feel is one of the best ways to work through difficulties.
3. Encourage your adolescent to reach out to a mentor or role model they might have.
4. Stress management, breathing, relaxation or meditation techniques can be helpful when faced with performance anxiety and to improve sleep at night (see websites on page 32).
5. Starting a new sport or group activity can be a proactive way to improve mood and foster self-confidence through participation.

Here are some examples of the emotional issues some young people experience following treatment for cancer:

- ongoing difficulty with behaviours they may have experienced during cancer treatment such as irritability, impatience or lashing out
- feeling withdrawn from others and not interested in going to school
- physical complaints without any clear medical cause (such

as headaches, tummy aches, tiredness or joint pain)

- poor sleep (such as not getting to sleep or frequent waking) and changes in appetite or eating patterns
- difficulty making friends or reintegrating with their friendship group
- disinterest or loss of pleasure in activities they used to enjoy
- increased fearfulness about trying new activities
- Excessive worrying about their health.

## Where can I get more help and advice?

1. Your adolescent may be eligible for an educational assessment through their school. Discuss this with their teacher, welfare officer or school principal.
2. Suggest your adolescent organises a meeting with their school counsellor or psychologist.
3. Encourage your adolescent to visit their general practitioner and ask for a Mental Health Plan under the Better Access scheme (this provides Medicare rebates for mental health support) to access a community psychologist or counsellor (up to 10 sessions a year).
4. Children and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) provide support for adolescents experiencing more complex and severe mental health conditions. Visit <[www2.health.vic.gov.au/mental-health/mental-health-services/services-by-population-group/services-for-children-and-adolescents](http://www2.health.vic.gov.au/mental-health/mental-health-services/services-by-population-group/services-for-children-and-adolescents)> for more information.
5. The Kids Helpline is a free and confidential 24-hour phone counselling service. Your adolescent can phone 1800 55 1800 or visit <[www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)> for more information.
6. headspace provides online resources for young people aged 12–25 who may be experiencing mental health difficulties. They also have local centres that young people can visit. See <[www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)> for more information and locations.
7. beyondblue provides online resources for lowered mood and depression in all ages. Visit <[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)>.
8. The youth section of <[www.anxietybc.com](http://www.anxietybc.com)> has some great resources to help young people with stress management.

## Other resources

Here are some additional resources that may help you better understand and address cognitive late effects in young people following cancer and its treatment.

*'Late, Lost and Unprepared: A parents' guide to helping children with executive functioning'* by J Cooper-Kahn and L Dietzel (2008)

*'Organize your ADD/ADHD Child: A practical guide for parents'* by Cheryl R Carter (2011)

While these books are not specific to childhood cancer survivors, they have a number of useful tips and techniques.

<https://learningprogram.rmhc.org.au/index.php> (Ronald McDonald Learning Program)

This website has a lot of useful information for parents and teachers on challenges faced by young people treated for a chronic illness and strategies for how to address these.

<http://www.york.ac.uk/res/wml/Classroom%20guide.pdf>

A very useful guide to working memory difficulties.

<http://raisingchildren.net.au/> (Raising Children Network)

A great resource for information on behaviour and learning challenges faced by teenagers.

[www.projectlearnnet.org](http://www.projectlearnnet.org) (LEARNet)

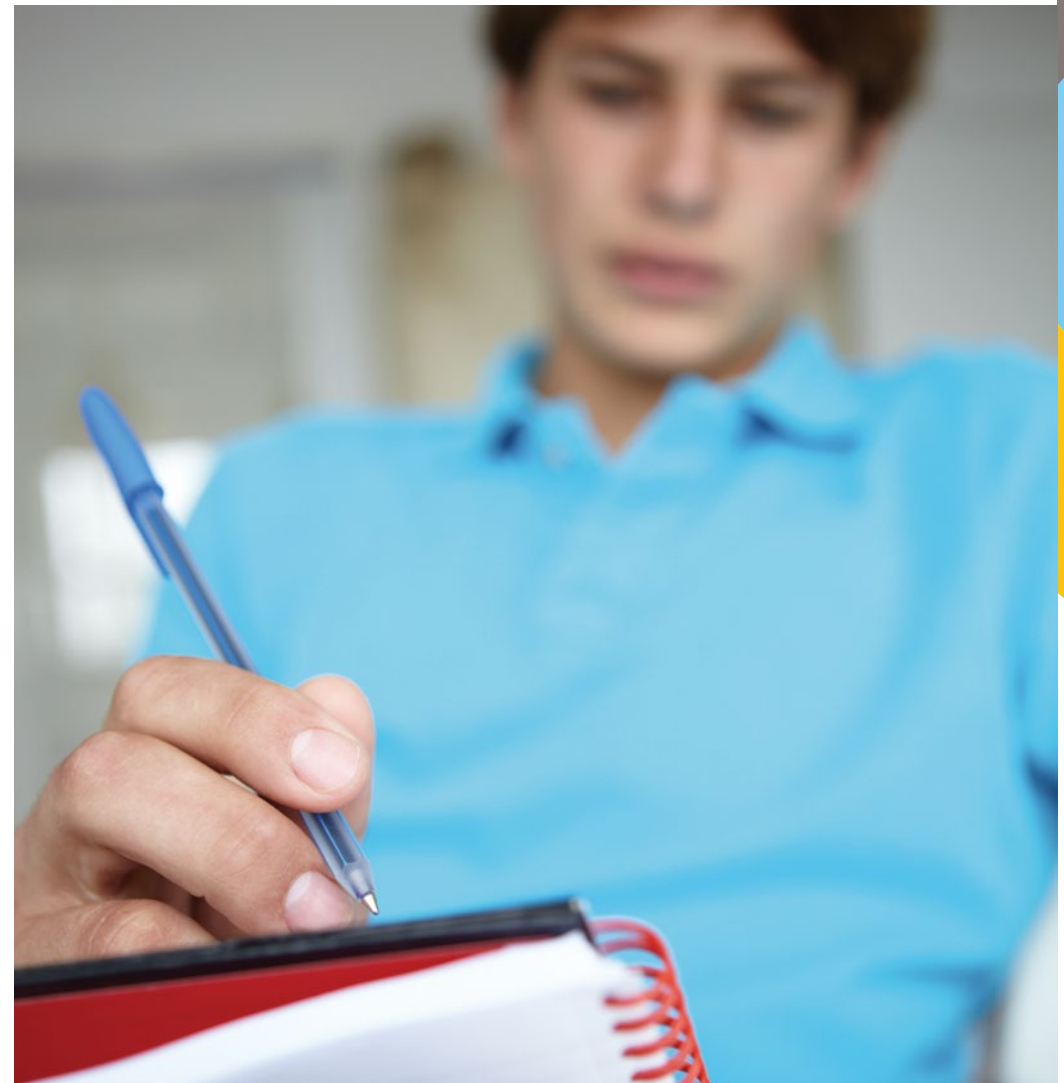
This website has been developed for people who have suffered a 'brain injury'. You might not find it relates to your son/daughter specifically, but it provides some general information and tips on a wide range of difficulties that young people can have with thinking, learning, emotions and behaviours.

## Useful contacts

**Long Term Follow-up Program**

**Phone:** (03) 9345 9152

**Email:** [ltf.program@rch.org.au](mailto:ltf.program@rch.org.au)



# Useful websites

## Paediatric Integrated Cancer Service (PICS)

[www.pics.org.au](http://www.pics.org.au)

## Anxiety Disorders Association of British Columbia

[www.anxietybc.com](http://www.anxietybc.com)

## Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre (Peter MacCallum)

[www.petermac.org/about-us/australian-cancer-survivorship-centre](http://www.petermac.org/about-us/australian-cancer-survivorship-centre)

## Australian Psychological Society (click on 'Find a Psychologist')

[www.psychology.org.au](http://www.psychology.org.au)

## beyondblue (managing depression and anxiety)

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

## Cancer Council Victoria

[www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au)

## The Centre for Working Memory and Learning, The University of York

[www.york.ac.uk/res/wml](http://www.york.ac.uk/res/wml)

## Children's Cancer and Leukaemia Group (United Kingdom)

[www.cclg.org.uk](http://www.cclg.org.uk)

## Cure Search for Children's Cancer (The Children's Oncology Group, North America)

[www.curesearch.org](http://www.curesearch.org)

## headspace

[www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)

## Hope portal – a website of recommended childhood cancer internet resources developed by the Children's Hospital Los Angeles

<http://searchhope.chla.org/>

## Kids Helpline

[www.kidshelpline.com.au](http://www.kidshelpline.com.au)

## LEARNet – problem-solving system and resource website

[www.projectlearn.net.org](http://www.projectlearn.net.org)

## Lifeline

[www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

## LIVESTRONG Foundation (North America)

[www.livestrong.org](http://www.livestrong.org)

## Monash Children's Hospital

[www.monashchildrens.org.au](http://www.monashchildrens.org.au)

## Ronald McDonald Learning Program

[www.learningprogram.rmhc.org.au](http://www.learningprogram.rmhc.org.au)

## Sparknotes – study notes and senior school support

[www.sparknotes.com](http://www.sparknotes.com)

## Ergo – State Library of Victoria: a website for Victorian students and their teachers

[ergo.slv.vic.gov.au](http://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au)

## Studentbox – an online community for senior high school students

[www.studentbox.com.au](http://www.studentbox.com.au)

## Raising Children Network

[www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)

## The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne

[www.rch.org.au](http://www.rch.org.au)

## VCE Help – VCE resources for students, parents and teachers

[www.vcehelp.com.au](http://www.vcehelp.com.au)

## Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority

[www.vcaa.vic.edu.au](http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au)

## Victorian Department of Health and Human Services – mental health services

<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/mental-health/mental-health-services/services-by-population-group/services-for-children-and-adolescents>

## Youthbeyondblue (young people and mental illness)

[www.youthbeyondblue.com](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com)

### Other booklets in this series

Please ask your nurse consultant or healthcare team about access to these books or for further information. These booklets are available on the PICS website at <[www.pics.org.au](http://www.pics.org.au)>.

Other information booklets in this series are:

#### **Learning curve: education and socialisation after childhood cancer**

An information booklet for children, parents and teachers

*Preschool (kindergarten) to prep*

#### **Learning curve: education and socialisation after childhood cancer**

An information booklet for children, parents and teachers

*Primary to early secondary school*



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