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Extended Insights

NONVERBAL LEARNING DISORDERS

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An Overview

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Teens with NLD (nonverbal learning disorders) have an unusual learning style: they are primarily highly visual learners when intaking information, yet excel at showing what they know verbally, or sometimes via speech, arts, drama or music. Decoding and surface retention for print comes easily to most students with NLD, but higher-level comprehension is more challenging. As a result, many prefer non-fiction - even textbooks or manuals - to novels, let alone teen fiction.

Struggling teens also diagnosed NLD can be particularly challenging in adolescent treatment. Very literal and often lacking in socially appropriate expressions of empathy or reciprocity, they can find group work awkward or uncomfortable. They tend to avoid reading that discusses sensitive issues such as those they now must confront. Whether in therapeutic wilderness programs, emotional growth boarding schools or RTC's, therapeutic staff and teachers often try but fail to find appealing, good quality stories with enough substance to stimulate self-reflection and sustain therapeutic guided discussion. Understanding the many shades of grey within the shifting teen social scene can seem an almost Herculean task for these teens, so books they will actually read and re-read that can improve their awareness, can be an important part of their successful integration into treatment group and ultimately back home. More information about the strengths and challenges facing teens with NLD can be found at www.nlda.org

**What will I do there?
Where will I live?
Will they be hard on me?
Why do I have to go?
What if no one likes me?
How will this change anything?**

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Key factors to look for in identifying high-interest novels for struggling teens with NLD:

- Books with very visual or graphic layouts (play-script or journal-style writing, courier-type

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font and much white space) are very attractive. In fact, students with NLD would be best served if all life's important lessons could be presented textual-graphically, i.e., as Power Point presentations.

- Books with "Revenge of the Nerds"-style plots where the non-cool crowd triumphs over the cool and often cruel cliques will make for easy character identification.
- Plots with self-deprecating humor will tend to present as reassuring and familiar.
- A first person or narrator style will make syntax and grammar simpler and easy to follow (also reduces number of pronoun shifts which many with NLD find confusing).
- Using fly-on-the-wall descriptions of life behind the scenes, will help the reader with NLD become more aware of the social patterns in daily life. This allows them to fill in the blanks in their interpersonal awareness, while identifying with the central hero figure (typically a misunderstood, besieged but highly creative soul) at the same time.
- Real-time, realistic references to current or futuristic technology, video gaming, the entertainment industry, instant online communication, politics etc. will keep the NLD reader's interest.
- Plot lines that describe how to survive high school hi-jinks and hysteria and keeping your head while others around you are getting high will make these books high-interest and effective reads for teens with NLD in particular.
- Teens with NLD will find more detailed, almost pedantic, how-to be a cool teen passages genuinely eye-opening - as well as entertaining - though they may rarely admit it.
- After years of social alienation or rejection, teens with NLD who end up as struggling teens in treatment, have likely devoted their adolescence to desperately seeking unconditional peer acceptance. As a result, they often tolerate the theme of pro-social choices literally only when it is snuck in through the back door of the novel.

NOTE: The author of this article has also done a review of **BE MORE CHILL**, a teen novel recommended for struggling teens with NLD found in the [Book Review section](#).



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