

The MJK Educators Differentiated Instruction Guide

A concise guide for parents and teachers · Adapting lessons and creating inclusive activities at home · Updated October 2026

General educational guidance, not a diagnosis or clinical advice. If you suspect a learning difficulty, disability or developmental concern, seek a professional assessment (see section 8).

1. What differentiation means

Differentiated instruction means keeping the learning goal the same while changing the route to it, so each learner can reach it. You can adjust four things: the **content** (what is learned), the **process** (how it is learned), the **product** (how learners show it) and the **learning environment**. It does not mean writing a separate lesson for every child. Start small: change one thing at a time.

2. What the research says

- **It can work, with caveats.** A 2023 meta-analysis of 49 studies found a significant positive effect on learning outcomes, but also that results depend on the context and country. A review of primary-school research found potential when it is implemented well, while evidence for secondary classes is still scarce.
- **It helps in inclusive classrooms.** An umbrella review of reviews found gains in reading, writing, speaking and grammar, plus motivation, engagement and social integration. Adjusting content and process showed the most consistent effects.
- **Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is promising but still maturing.** Reviews report positive academic and social outcomes, with results varying widely between studies. The idea is to plan flexible options from the start, so fewer learners need separate adjustments later.
- **Do not match teaching to “learning styles”.** Reviews going back to 2004 find no evidence that teaching visual, auditory or kinaesthetic “types” differently improves learning. Instead, adapt to what each learner already knows, needs and is interested in, and use a mix of methods for everyone.
- **Two low-cost habits have strong evidence.** The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) reports that teaching learners to plan, monitor and review their own learning (metacognition) gives about eight months' extra progress on average. Quality feedback shows a similar average gain. Unstructured group work does not produce these gains.
- **Kenya context.** The 2018 Sector Policy for Learners and Trainees with Disabilities makes inclusive education its overarching principle, and Kenya's curriculum framework recognises learners who follow the regular curriculum and those who need adapted routes. Reviews describe the policy as strong on paper and weaker in practice, with gaps in trained teachers and assessment services. Families often need to build supports themselves.

3. A five-step planning routine

1. **Set one clear goal.** Write what every learner should know or do by the end, in a sentence.
2. **Check readiness quickly.** Use two or three questions, a “show me” task, or an exit question from the last lesson.
3. **Choose your adjustment.** Change the content, the process, the product or the environment (section 4).

4. **Teach explicitly, then scaffold and fade.** Model the skill, support the first attempts, then remove help gradually.
5. **Give quick feedback and adjust.** Tell learners what they did well and what to do next, then use what you saw to plan the next lesson.

4. Four ways to adapt a lesson

What you change	How it looks	Low-cost examples
Content	Same skill, different materials	Texts at two reading levels; smaller or larger number ranges; vocabulary taught before the lesson; examples from your own community
Process	Different support and pace	Worked examples; step-by-step cards; counters, bottle tops or sticks for maths; pair work; shorter chunks; extra thinking time
Product	Different ways to show learning	Written answer, drawing, spoken explanation, model, or voice recording, all judged against the same simple checklist
Environment	Different conditions	Quiet corner or shared table; visual timetable; timer; movement breaks; less clutter; seating that suits the learner

5. Practical strategies by learner need

These are starting points, not labels. Watch what helps each child and keep what works.

Learner need	Try this
Needs more support	Break tasks into small steps; use worked examples; revisit earlier skills briefly before new ones; praise specific progress
Ready for more challenge	Offer deeper questions, not just extra worksheets; let them design a problem, teach a sibling, or take on an open project
Finds it hard to focus	Short tasks with a clear end point; a visual checklist; movement breaks; one instruction at a time; a quiet, tidy workspace
Finds reading or writing hard	Read texts aloud or use audio; allow spoken answers; shorten written tasks; use sentence starters and word banks
Finds maths hard or stressful	Use real objects first, then pictures, then numbers; practise little and often; celebrate method, not only answers
Multilingual learners	Allow discussion in the home language; pre-teach key words with picture cards; build a small bilingual word list (for example English, Kiswahili, mother tongue)
Sensory or physical needs	Adapt the materials (large print, tactile objects, adjusted seating or tools); allow extra time; ask the learner what helps

6. Inclusive activities at home

Good activities have a low floor (everyone can start) and a high ceiling (everyone can go further). Each idea below works with mixed ages and abilities and needs few resources.

Activity	Everyone can	Extension for those ready
Market maths: plan a shopping list with a Ksh budget	Count, sort and match items to prices	Compare unit prices, work out change, find the best buy
Kitchen science or baking	Take a role: measurer, reader, timer or recorder	Double or halve the recipe; predict and explain changes
Story circle	Tell, draw or act a part of the story	Write a new ending or a character diary
Nature scavenger hunt	Find items from a picture or word card	Classify, measure and record findings in a table

Activity	Everyone can	Extension for those ready
Recycled-materials build challenge	Choose how to build and present the model	Test it, improve it and explain the design choices
Learning stations (three short tasks to rotate through)	Pick tasks at the right starting level	Add a harder station or a “teach it” station

Find more ideas in our free [Activity Ideas](#) downloads: the [STEM Challenges Pack](#) (building, kitchen science, maths in action and unplugged coding), the [Arts & Crafts Guide](#) (drawing, sculpture, textiles and cultural crafts) and the [Outdoor Learning Ideas](#) (nature study, community and place, adventure, and service). Each has adaptations and age bands, so they pair well with the strategies in this guide. All are on our Resources page: mjkeducators.co.ke/resources.html#activities.

7. Tips for different settings

For parents teaching siblings together

- Share one theme, then give each child a task at their own level.
- Give roles that suit different strengths, and rotate them.
- Let older children explain ideas to younger ones; explaining deepens their own understanding.

For teachers and tutors with small groups

- Keep groups flexible and change them often, so no learner is stuck with a fixed label.
- Use structured pair or group tasks with clear roles; unstructured group work gives weaker results.
- Offer a choice board of two or three tasks that all meet the same goal.
- Prepare an “anchor task” that learners can start independently while you support others.

8. Check progress and know when to seek help

Track progress with short, regular checks: a quick quiz, a work sample, or a conversation where the learner explains their thinking. Keep dated samples in your records.

Consider a professional assessment if a learner keeps struggling despite several weeks of adjusted teaching, shows strong frustration or avoidance, or has a large gap between what they can say and what they can write or do. Start with your child's doctor or a qualified teacher or psychologist. In Kenya, Educational Assessment and Resource Centres (EARCs) assess learners' needs, and the Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISE) supports special needs education, though service capacity varies by county.

9. This week's starter checklist

1. Pick one lesson and write its single learning goal.
2. Add one adjustment: a reading level, a support card, a choice of product, or a quieter space.
3. Ask the learner to say what helped.
4. Give one piece of specific feedback.
5. Keep what worked and try one new adjustment next week.

Sources

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