

THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:
A Letter for Parents by the
NYU Child Study Center

VOLUME 2, ISSUE 8

APRIL 2004

LEARNING DISABILITY OR LEARNING DIFFERENCE?

What do researchers tell us about the way children learn?

Every night the students in the fourth grade at PS 333 have to read for 30 minutes and write a brief entry into their reading logs. Once each month, each child has to complete a more lengthy assignment about the book. One month, Michael decided he wanted to dress up as one of the characters in his book and then, while in character, he told the class about the problems his character faced. Denise decided to use action figures and clay to create a diorama about an important scene in her book. Evan wrote an essay that explained an important character in the book based on quotes taken from what the character said.

How and why do children make these kinds of choices? Investigators have described as many as 21 variables that impact the way children learn. Learning styles are typically composed of psychological, social, sensory, environmental and emotional parameters. Surprisingly, in education, learning differences are not always appreciated, however, all we have to do is look in the mirror and we recognize that we all have different characteristics that make us unique and distinct. Researchers emphasize the importance of exploring a student's passions and strengths to overcome weaknesses; to look for "the positive" in every child. Furthermore, negative behaviors often seen in children with learning disabilities can be developed into positive attributes in adulthood. For example, a child that is stubborn and unyielding can learn to turn these negative traits into fierce determination, with a tenacity to achieve.

What is a learning disability?

Although many people use the terms "learning difference" and "learning disability" interchangeably, the terms are not synonymous. A learning disability affects a child's daily functioning, impedes his or her academic achievement and substantially interferes with his or her ability to learn. In 1967, the National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children (NACHC) developed a definition of learning disabilities, a definition that is quoted widely and is included in public law: "'Specific learning disability' means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage."

The term "learning disabilities" is all-embracing; it describes a syndrome, not a specific child with specific problems. The definition assists in classifying children, not teaching them. Parents and teachers must observe how well an individual child performs, assess strengths and weaknesses, and develop distinct ways to help each child learn. Generally, children with learning disabilities have intelligences in the average to superior range, and what is so obvious about them is that they are able to perform well in so many areas. The discrepancy between what it seems the child ought to be able to do and what he or she can actually do, however, is the hallmark of the learning disability.

Developmental concerns

Attaining skills later than peers is not necessarily cause for alarm. Children reach developmental milestones at different times and even vary between siblings. Observing other children within the same age group as your own can give you an idea of what a norm might be. However, you must not jump to conclusions if your four-year-old prefers to play with blocks rather than pick up a book and read. It is important to keep in mind that a child's chronological age does not always match his or her maturational age. When teachers adapt goals and expectations to the developmental readiness of each learner, the teacher can accommodate the differences in learning. Research suggests that the brain is primed to

receive information at different times during the developmental process. These peak learning times provide windows of opportunity when optimum learning can occur.

When should I seek professional help?

Early intervention is very important. If you suspect that your child is not developing or learning as expected, professionals such as learning specialists, speech/language pathologists, and neuropsychologists can evaluate a child to identify strengths and weaknesses, and determine if a learning disability is present. School districts are responsible to provide the necessary evaluations free of charge. A comprehensive neuropsychological evaluation explores the areas of innate intelligence, academic achievement, memory and learning, attention, executive functioning, speech and language, sensory and motor functioning, personality and emotional functioning. Evaluation techniques include assessment tests, interviews, direct observation, reviews of your child's educational and medical history, and conferences with professionals who work with your child. Since you are one of the best observers of your child's development, it is important that you be an active participant in the evaluation process. Once identified, the right remedial services can be provided so the child can develop skills needed to lead a successful and productive life.

If you are aware of the common signs of learning disabilities, you will be able to recognize potential problems early:

- Speaks late, shows slow vocabulary growth, and/or often unable to “find” the right word when speaking
- Avoids reading aloud
- Difficulty rhyming words and/or difficulty learning the correspondence between letters and sounds
- Trouble learning numbers, alphabet, days of the week, colors, and/or shapes
- Difficulty following directions or routines, difficulty understanding questions, and/or difficulty with math word problems
- Fine motor and pencil skills slow to develop; avoids writing sentences or compositions
- Slow to recall facts; works at a very slow pace
- Trouble learning about time
- Reverses letter sequences (ex., soiled/solid, left/felt)
- Difficulty understanding body language and facial expressions
- Misspells the same word in a single piece of writing (ex., there, their, they're)

If you don't understand the test results, ask questions! Watch your child's progress to be sure that your child's needs are being met. Learn about your special education rights and responsibilities by requesting a summary of legal rights from your child's school.

Written and developed by Susan J. Schwartz, M.A. Ed., Kimberly Williams, M.A. and the staff of the NYU Child Study Center

ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, neuropsychiatric problems, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212)263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8552.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, www.AboutOurKids.org.



**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health
NYU Child Study Center**

577 First Avenue
New York, NY 10016
(212) 263-6622

1981 Marcus Avenue, Suite C102
Lake Success, NY 11042
(516) 358-1808

The Parent Letter has received generous support from the following donors: Joseph Healey and Thomas Walker.