

Help for Parents: Understanding Your Child's Needs:

How They Learn, Why They Don't Learn, and

The Testing Process for Learning Problems

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## The Importance of Basic Skills

### What You Can Do Now To Save You Headaches Later

- Try to keep your child enrolled in high school and on the right curriculum path. If college is not your aim, focus on obtaining fundamental job skills.
- If college is in your child's future, focus on a college preparatory "track" in junior high school, especially in English, math and science.
- Grade school math, reading and language skills form the foundation for learning in junior high school, high school and college. Elementary school grades are often inflated and may not alert parents of learning problems. Don't be lulled into complacency. Catastrophic blocks for achievement in high school, college and careers may develop.
- Language and math courses are sequential and progressive. Skills not mastered in the 3rd through 7th grades result in missing links in the student's progressive learning chain. - Watch for missing links that can impede high school, college and career achievement.
- In junior high school, students are placed in English and math classes according to their demonstrated ability. Being

"tracked" at a lower level than the student's true ability is often the beginning of years of underachievement and frustration in academics. This can result in diminished career choices and a less satisfying life. Parents are often unaware of this "tracking" procedure.

#### Preparing for a Higher Education or Job Placement

- Those who decide to work at semi-skilled labor in industry need the mental abilities to follow sequences of procedures. These jobs require that a person be able to read manuals, do mathematical calculations and remember details crucial to job success. Students should learn visual sequencing through support computer programs designed for this purpose.
- Competency in language, reading, math and science is essential for entering college curriculums or obtaining skilled jobs to become self-supporting.
- Mastering these subject areas is crucial for those who desire gaining admittance to out-of-state or private schools.
- Many college-bound students arrive on campus functioning at junior high school levels in basics such as English and math. This creates a problem as college instruction is faster paced than high school and demands more independent work. Classes start at high functioning levels, leaving no time to "catch up."

As a result, when freshman students are required to take basic math or English courses that they should have mastered in high school, typically, more than 60% will get a "C" average or lower. For example, between the years 1980 and 2005, remedial math courses in 4-year colleges increased by 75%. Remedial college classes are the most highly endowed by the federal government. Parents are then forced to pay extra years of college tuition, which can run \$12,000.-\$60,000. per year to learn the basic courses that should have been mastered in earlier grades.

#### If You Don't Prepare: There Will be a Great Strain on Both Students And Parents

The consequences of being poorly prepared and getting off to a poor start on the job or in college profoundly affect students and parents alike. Let's consider -

- A poorly prepared student may be forced to drop out of high school or college. Plans and goals are reoriented to accept a

lesser job or career, working for a lower wage. This country's large drop-out rate must be eliminated.

- It is difficult to live on a low wage, which precipitates not only personal hardships but creates social dilemmas.
- A struggling student may take a minimum college course load and require extra semesters of work to graduate, achieving only a modest grade point average.
- Many college fields require 16 hours of foreign language, 8 hours of science, and certain math backgrounds. Often, they require a "B" average for admittance into a major field concentration . Therefore, these foundations must be mastered in earlier grades.
- If admittance is not obtained in a desired field, alternative fields must be considered. Often the easily accessible majors create saturated fields in which job competition is fierce.
- Some students take minimal course loads in order to ease study pressure, and many need five to six years to graduate. This luxury costs \$15,000 to \$60,000 per extra year in tuition costs alone.
- Increasing numbers of young people in their 20s are living at home or under the parent umbrella. More parents than ever are subsidizing their young adult offspring, still hoping for miracles.

## How We Process Information and Why Understanding It

### Is Important To Us:

### A Scenario of What You Can Expect

Let's look at how we process information. Our primary modalities are by what we see and what we hear. These are called visual and auditory (listening) memory. These two pathways become our dominant learning styles, although there are, in reality, many.

Before we begin the testing adventure, let's look at what successes you can expect from college or technical training if you have deficient learning styles.

You need to know what type of college or career is appropriate for you. Otherwise, it can take you years of being frustrated and spending unnecessary money to find out the hard way.

There is a big difference between a college university education and a junior college education. Although junior colleges are good preparatory education for high school grads, they are just the beginning of a formal education. They serve as a good bridge from high school to college for the student who has not excelled in the basics and needs easier courses with some at the remedial level. It also is an excellent, low-cost way for the working person to attend school part-time. If you have:

#### High levels of auditory and visual memory

You can obtain a professional career, such as a scientist, engineer, attorney, doctor, or medical technician. You can also attend trade and technical schools. Attending a university, medical school, technical or law school is possible for you. However, having good information processing capability does not eliminate the necessity for self-discipline and hard work that is necessary to obtain these degrees. You have the qualities necessary for admittance into these fields, providing that you have mastered higher levels of English, mathematics, science and a foreign language in high school.

#### High visual and low auditory memory, or visa versa, high auditory and low visual memory

Your career options may be limited. However, you can, with effort, obtain B's in high school with an average level of courses. Higher levels of science and math will be difficult for you. The B's obtained in high school will melt and fade into C's and D's at the university level. Career entry criteria that require a B average will be difficult to fulfill. You can, however, obtain A's and B's at a trade school, small college or junior college if you put forth much effort.

#### Low visual and low auditory memory

You will be an average to low average high school student and most likely will not succeed in a university setting. You can, however, obtain B's and C's with excessive effort at a trade school, junior college or small college. If you're considering trade school, you should know that admittance

is getting tougher to gain as there is keen competition. Individuals that can rapidly process visual and listening information will have the edge.

You can find out which category you are in by having a formal diagnostic evaluation. A formal testing evaluation will not only save you needless extra years of college, but also from entering a wrong career that you may not have the brain power for. This would be a tragic realization after having had years of struggle, frustration and disappointment. Even though brain abilities can be improved, you should not select a career in which your mental abilities are their weakest. Wouldn't it be great to improve your brain power by developing **strong high visual and auditory** pathways?

Obviously, this type of mental aptitude testing is far more important than taking career interest inventories which merely measure what you "would like to do" and not what "you are realistically capable of doing."

## The Personal Evaluation Adventure: The Testing Process for Learning Problems

Learning problems are often a hidden dilemma. Many students with information processing difficulties are not diagnosed since testing takes time and money. It is alarming to note that many junior high students are scoring in basic skills all the way down to second and third grade levels. Parents should inquire at what grade level their children are performing in reading, math and spelling.

Standardized tests of achievement should be administered at major transition points from one level of schooling to the next. This is particularly important between grade school and junior high, junior high-to-high school, high school and college or work. This monitoring system should include other simple weekly diagnostic measures to assist teachers and parents to evaluate their progress. As parents, you should be an active, informed part of this. Begin by asking to see, and then reviewing, your child's daily reading, math and spelling assignments and tests.

Classrooms are full of students with information processing deficiencies. One recently published report revealed that most students have between two to five cognitive weaknesses, and are forced to compensate. Usually, teachers try to cope by directing their teaching to those with high average abilities. Although teachers are becoming aware of the information processing difficulty, unfortunately they lack the resources to remedy the situation. As a result, it is becoming more difficult to find and attract capable teachers who are willing to deal with this learning dilemma of having classrooms consisting of diverse ranges of abilities.

Standardized aptitude and cognitive testing have been continuously developed over the past three decades, and have been refined to determine which thinking skills constitute intelligence and learning ability. Do not confuse cognitive skills testing with educational assessment testing.

Cognitive skills assessment measures thinking and memory levels. Assessment testing measures academic achievement levels in reading, language arts, math, science, and use of reference materials. Most schools have been routine nationally standardized achievement testing every other year to measure academic progress, and are given by classroom teachers. Now, with the new George W. Bush mandate, classes between the grades 1-8 will be tested each year in core basic skills.

However, cognitive skills' testing is not routinely administered because it is not only labor intensive, but requires professionals with advanced degrees.

Additionally, the American Psychological Association (APA) requires that specialized cognitive and intelligence testing must be administered and evaluated by educational professionals or psychologists with either masters or doctoral degrees. In public schools, the tests are administered by staff members, called the Special Services Team, which consist of the School Psychologist, the Speech-language Therapist, the Special Education teacher or the Learning Disability Specialist.

Many learning centers offer assessment testing, which can be administered by teachers or even paraprofessionals with bachelor's degrees or less. Private learning disability and speech-language specialists are qualified to administer the testing you need, and for much less of a monetary investment.

Until recently, private psychologists almost always gave in clinical or hospital settings or cognitive skills and intelligence tests. Parents complained that these professional reports were difficult to understand for the average person having an ordinary problem. And, these assessments and evaluations can be costly. That is why it is prudent to check out all of your options.

Now that you understand this process, you can obtain the information you want and need. Although this process will take planning and a little effort, but it will be well worth it.

Pre-Kindergarten screenings that test for school readiness and so that your child may avoid scholastic failure are now in general use. It would be in your best interest to take advantage of these. If your children have not been identified as having a perceptual weakness, gross motor problems (problems with balance, walking or skipping) or fine motor problems (inability to hold a pencil and write well), a school or private professional should test them. Weaknesses should be pinpointed early so that classroom correction may be implemented.

Types of professionals that can test your child:

1. school psychologists
2. private cognitive psychologists
3. private learning disability specialists
4. private speech-language therapists
5. teachers with advanced specialized training

To find these professionals, check with your schools and also look in the yellow pages of your telephone book under Education, Schools with Special Academic Education, Psychologists, Mental Health Centers, and university and medical schools. Career and guidance counselors generally do not have the proper training for this type of testing.

Additionally, the specialists you are looking for may be located on a hospital or med center diagnostic staff, or in one of the following university departments. If you do not object to students

administering the testing, which cost less, check the following departments. They might also have professional staff members who would agree to do the testing:

The Special Education Department

The Education Department

The Speech-Language Department

The Psychology Department

Unless you understand these evaluation procedures, and what tests to ask for, you could find diagnostic evaluations expensive. Many complete batteries of tests usually run \$1500. to \$2500. A private qualified specialist may charge less. By following this outline, you will save yourself time and money. You can check your medical insurance carrier to see if any of the testing is covered.

Although this testing is somewhat costly, it may be a sound investment in the long run. People have difficulty visualizing the mental requirements needed for well-paying and satisfying careers. Parents appear blind to the fact that a young person with proper education and career training and guidance might earn \$29,000 - \$35,000 a year at age 25, while a less educated person might earn \$9,000 to \$15,000 a year. Disregarding inflation and tax factors, this annual income would approximate at least a million dollars difference in gross income by the time your child retired. What a large return for such a small, early investment of diagnostic testing and special programs assistance!

### Does Your Child Have Special Needs, or Is He/She a Normal, Active Child?

Sometimes, we can jump to false conclusions that an overly active child has a learning disability. The term "learning disability" was an educational term coined in 1962. Educators described it as a disorder of attention, memory, thinking, listening, talking, reading, spelling, writing or arithmetic. This includes perceptual and memory problems of dyslexia and aphasia. It does not include mental retardation, emotional disturbance, and environmental deprivation, visual, hearing or

motor handicaps. Fortunately, the U.S. Office of Education authorized legislation Public Law 91-320, the Learning Disabilities Act of 1969, to require that school professionals do perceptual testing based upon parent or teacher referrals.

In 1989, the Learning Disabilities Association proposed to Congress that a new term, *Attention Deficit Disorder* (ADD), be added to the Education Handicapped Act. Although a specific description and classification of learning disabilities could not be agreed upon, on July 20, 1990 the house passed the Equity and Excellence in Education Implementation Act which increases funding to schools at all levels. This was to allow for more learning disabled students to be serviced within the classroom as “a class within a class.”

This legislation, passed by congress in 1997 became The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). And, most parents are not familiar of this law, or understand its implications.

State guidelines dictate that in order to qualify for learning disability assistance, either reading, language or math levels must be two to three years below grade level. Most students compensate well enough to take reading and math tests above this minimum requirement. Therefore, the more severe levels are the ones that fill the case loads. It is important to realize that these special needs conditions can be improved with the proper resources and training.

If your child is classified as learning disabled, speech and language impaired, emotionally disturbed or mentally handicapped, you are not alone. In the past decade, the number of special education children served in the United States, from the ages of 6 to 21, was more than 4 million. The learning disabled totaled nearly 5 million children, those classified as mentally handicapped were 521,782 children and those classified as emotionally disturbed were 334,405 children. One million more children had other handicapping or special needs conditions, including speech and language impaired, gifted, vision-impaired, hearing-impaired, health-impaired, multi-handicapped and orthopedically handicapped. We may be unaware that gifted children are often the most ignored category, and have special needs in order that their talents are utilized to the fullest. Many more

individuals were not tested and currently are not being helped. As you can see, those needing special help with cognitive retraining run upward into the millions.

These statistics are mind-boggling. They show how important it is for parents to truly care about the kind of instruction and education their child receives. Do not think you are alone. There is no need to suffer and be ashamed about your circumstances. Remember, you now have hope!

Visit your school's resource room's learning disability specialist or the classroom teacher and ask the following questions:

Questions to ask your child's teachers and the special services team:

Focusing on your child's abilities begins with the proper diagnostic testing, followed up by a good remediation plan. Once your child has taken the ability tests, carefully review the results with a skilled professional. How severe is the learning disability? How low are the scores? Is the deficiency in the visual modality (spatial or letters) or the auditory (listening) modality, or both? How does your child comprehend information and through which learning sensory pathway?

Even if the tests are correctly interpreted, there may not be many choices available for personalized instruction. Many parents do not understand test results and the placement implications. Attend your staffing conference. Become informed. Do not feel too intimidated to ask questions. If your child scores poorly but not low enough for a special classroom, find out what your options are.

Diplomatically, and in a nondefensive manner, inquire about the special education teacher's credentials. Query as to what level of degree, training and experience they have. The teacher should be certified by the state, and either have or be close to having a masters degree in Special Education.

At what grade level is your child functioning in reading, spelling and mathematics? Special Education classes primarily help students with the basic skills of reading, spelling and math. Insist that your child achieve a one-year gain in these areas every year. Realize, however, the yearly gains in

these basic areas will vary, depending upon the teacher's energy level and personal commitment.

Understand that while your child is being pulled from the regular classroom for this limited amount of tutoring help, the child may be missing important in-class instruction. You need to weigh this delicate balance carefully at your child's staffing conferences.

Ask which curriculums are being used to teach these basic skills? What are the focus areas, and how much time is spent in each of these areas: remedial reading, math, science, handwriting and spelling? *Are cognitive retraining, memory, critical thinking, attention and motivation being addressed?* If not, insist that they investigate and utilize private programs that emphasize this. They may not be costly.

Subsequently, the special education teachers become pressured by district "policies of excellence" to offer tutorials of individual subjects, such as reading, math and English. They spend the Spring semester "teaching how to take the test," tutoring literacy skills so that their students perform satisfactorily on the district's nationally standardized achievement tests that will be reported to the public. Therefore, districts are forced to compete with one another, and will even more so when the "Choice Movement" takes effect soon.

### What To Do Next:

We may falsely rationalize that our special needs child requires extra attention. Even though you have solutions available, it is easy to focus your energy on our more talented siblings. Although children with corrective needs will prove to be more difficult to follow and monitor, you can do it with the right focus and determination. You'll be glad that you did.

Encourage your school to have well equipped computer labs with fingering instruction. There are many learning programs that offer innovative teaching by integrating movement and color into the reading material that a textbook cannot provide. These programs also give important practice with hand-eye coordination.

Skill deficiencies can virtually disappear when children use computer modems in their special education classes. The modems provide "pen-pals" through written messages from one room to another room, or school. Through these personalized relayed messages, the physically disabled are accepted for what they are, rather than how they appear physically.

This report was written to give you many ideas on how to stay abreast of your children's achievements in school. You've learned that there are different circumstances for various types of people. Schools can't do everything to teach and manage your children. It is now up to you to take the initiative and help the classroom teacher. Take control of your life and your child's life!

The following is a checklist for you to post on your refrigerator. Use this too monitor your involvement with your child's education. Try to make progress by becoming increasingly involved. Make notations on your calendar and this chart of your actual participation efforts.

### Your Personal Involvement Checklist

- Education will be a priority in our home.
- I will have my child enter Kindergarten fully prepared and ready to learn. I will have had a pre-kindergarten perceptual screening.
- If my children are past kindergarten, I will see that they have cognitive testing by a professional if I have reason for concern.
- I will observe my child's speaking, reading, handwriting, and spelling abilities. If there is any difficulty, I will have him tested by a qualified professional.
- I am aware that in many cases grades are inflated, and that my child may not be an A or B student as described by his teacher. Those who receive failing grades receive such for incomplete or missing assignments, not for how well they are completed.
- I will carefully follow nationally standardized tests given by my school district, and will look at the percentiles and understand where my child fits into the total picture.
- I will monitor and limit TV viewing, the Internet, and computer video games.

- If I have any concerns about his educational progress with the basics, I will seek professional cognitive skills testing either by the school or by private professionals.
- I will take my child to the public library to read and to check out books.
- I will introduce my child to the positive culture and environment in the community and the world around him.
- I will visit my child's school at least twice a year, especially on Parent's Night.
- I will communicate with my child's teacher by telephone if I have questions.
- I will make sure homework is not only monitored, but completed and turned in on time.
- I will meet with the guidance counselor to see which academic path my child in. I will review my child's cumulative folder for negative notations.
- I will investigate whether my child qualifies to take higher levels of math, science and English.

By observing and following these procedures, you will save yourself from having life-long financial support of your child and double the expenses spent along the way. These suggestions will make your life less hectic and stressful for all the members of your family.