

## LEARNING STRATEGIES FOR HOME AND SCHOOL

There are three active phases of learning; processing skills, executive function skills, and academic skills. These strategies can be used with all children, no matter what the level of functioning. The purpose of these strategies is to help children in a special education environment as well as a regular education succeed with their curriculum. For instance, in my private practice there were five students (ages 8 to 14 years) who were labeled as “Unable to be Educated” by their school district. When looking at these specific children they had no textbooks. They were either in an SDC environment or as termed by one school, “being sent to the other side” where there was basically a classroom in which daily living skills were taught at the age of eight years because the school felt the children could not progressed any further.

*Parents...let me take a minute to address this issue of a school district telling you your child is, “hopeless.” No one has the right to tell you what is not possible about your child. You are the power source...so FIGHT!*

It just amazed me that none of these children’s progress was tracked on a daily basis with regards to their learning and academic goals. Based on how the special education system is structured, it was understandable that the teachers felt they could not manage their classrooms because even though there were only 12 children in the classroom, they were functioning at different academic, emotional, and physical levels, making it impossible to have a textbook for each child based on their level of ability.

As I took each one of these children and began working with them, I found very quickly they were able to work from a regular education curriculum. These strategies were developed based on what we know from brain development in terms of looking at the strengths for learning within each child. Again, these were originally used with children who were on the very severe end of the spectrum. As of 2004 to current, these strategies have been used in a private Blue Ribbon school, grades K through 12, in the Los Angeles area. These strategies can be used across the board including a special education setting and a regular education private school where the child is struggling in the classroom.

In looking at developing these strategies, it is important to first look at the three active phases of learning.

**The First Phase is processing skills**, which deals with memory, attention, language, motor, and coordination. This is the core for developing academics.

**The second active phase of learning is executive function skills**, which deals with visualization, re-verbalization, time concepts, and study skills.

**The third phase is academic skills**, which includes reading, writing, mathematics, and subject content.

In looking at the three active phases of learning, this is the number one reason why we have children in a regular education curriculum who struggle in spite of receiving tutoring and do not become independent, competent learners but rather limp through academically and constantly need one-on-one help year after year. Even though we see the child struggling in the classroom, we do not focus on why they are struggling but give them more of the subject content. For example, if a child is struggling with reading, we simply feel the child needs to practice with more reading. However 50% of the time this is not the case, because of the way our brains develop. Processing skills and executive function skills develop before academics. The development of these two skill areas directly influence academic development.

When a child is identified as struggling in the classroom the first place we need to assess is their processing and executive function skills. Most of time, when a child is identified as struggling in the classroom, the first thing they are referred for is academic testing.

Specifically in the area of processing skills, short-term memory, both auditory and visual, as well as processing speed are the two most important skills that must be developed for independent, competent learning. For the student who is struggling with reading, asking them to do more reading, most of the time will not address the issue of where they are struggling.

The second part is to look at each student's strengths in learning. Our primary stimulation in a classroom setting is received through either auditory or visual learning. Research tells us that 50% of the children in the classroom are dominant visual learners and within that 50%, 30% of those children will be dominant visual learners. This means that their highest accuracy for learning is through visual stimulation. In an elementary setting, the teaching model is typically an auditory presentation. An auditory learner does best when presented with rote repetition, and this is what is typically seen in the elementary classrooms. A typical assignment is to write spelling words two times each and then write them in a sentence. This is rote repetition and results in a very high accuracy for learning with an auditory learner.

On the other side, this is the lowest level of accuracy for a visual learner as well as the most frustrating. Many times parents will say that it takes the child two hours to complete a 30 minute homework assignment. In addition, the child will become frustrated doing their homework and especially when they are required to perform rote repetition such as writing math facts or spelling words. The reason is because this is not their strength for learning. Another characteristic that we will see with visual learners when doing homework is that they will spend countless hours doing homework but the end result (i.e., spelling test) does not

reflect the effort put into the assignment. Or, they may receive 100% on their spelling test, but a day or week later they are unable to spell the words. Therefore, we see written expression, especially in terms of spelling, may be significantly reduced. This can also affect carry over moving from a phonetic reader into a visual reader.

This all has to do with the child's strengths surrounding learning. If we are not focusing on their strengths, then information is not easily stored and, therefore, not easily accessed. Through the identification of the child's learning strengths, we can copy these strengths across the board in all areas of curriculum. For a child who is in a regular education environment, and immediate change will be seen in terms of increased accuracy and decreased frustration.

For the child who is in the special education category, we see that by identifying their learning strengths the child will begin moving forward using regular education curriculum.

**How does not focusing on a child's strength affect attention?** A loss of attention in the classroom or during homework many times can be linked to simply not focusing on the student's strengths for learning. Fifty percent of visual learners, many times they are a visual learner because the neural pathway that is responsible for encoding sound and filtering background noise may not be as developed as it should be. Therefore, the brain compensates and the child becomes a more dominant visual learner than auditory learner. In this case, we see that the student is at a very high energy cost for just listening within the classroom. Just like anything where we put out a great amount of energy, over time, we will fatigue. This is labeled as auditory overload or auditory fatigue. For the child it creates somewhat of a roller coaster effect within the classroom as they take in information, fatigue, and then shut down, resulting in missed information. They then recover from the auditory overload, begin taking in information, and then fatigue again. This pattern can continue over and over throughout the course of the day. Simply by providing more visualization and less rote repetition, we see a decrease in that roller coaster effect. The student does not have to expend so much energy to listen while trying to filter background noise. Many times, in this same situation, we will see a child who is very bright but their learning curve is flat or not progressing, and does not reflect their level of intelligence. This can be easily changed by simply focusing on their strengths for learning.

In looking at auditory overload or auditory fatigue, we see that when a child goes into auditory overload he or she will demonstrate one of three characteristics, which is dependent on personality as well as the nervous system. One characteristic of auditory overload is loss of attention in which a child goes into auditory overload and "checks out". This is the child who is labeled a daydreamer. This child is typically in their seat and looking at the teacher, but the information is not registering. The second child is the one who is most mislabeled

as ADD or ADHD. This is the child who goes into auditory overload and becomes bored. They will begin fidgeting or bothering others around them. The third example is most typical of a child who is labeled with Autism or Pervasive Developmental Delay. When this child goes into auditory overload, they will withdraw from the situation. For example, there might a group of children playing but this child will be off by themselves.

No Matter what the level of functioning academically, from the child who is struggling to attend to the child diagnosed with Autism...when we celebrate the child's learning strengths and incorporate their strengths into their curriculum as learning strategies, we will have happy, successful learners.

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