

AT
WIT'S
END

A parent's guide to ending the struggle, tears, and turmoil of learning disabilities

BY • JILL STOWELL •

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A Note to Parents

Dear Parents...

I remember walking my five-year-old daughter to school on her first day of Kindergarten. I stood at the doorway to the classroom with the other moms and dads. We all had lumps in our throats and dreams in our hearts. This was a very big step at the beginning of that long road called “school,” that would help determine our children’s future.

Unfortunately, for at least three out of every ten children, the excitement of learning and dreams of success will begin to fade. They will be replaced with pain and frustration somewhere along the road. Because in spite of good intelligence, these children have some difficulty with learning.

They may have a problem learning to read or spell. Maybe they have difficulty remembering what they see or hear. Listening and paying attention may be hard. Perhaps they struggle to comprehend or to express their ideas.

Parents begin to spend hours and hours every day helping their child struggle through homework. Kids start to feel stupid and frustrated and angry. Family tension and worry rise to the breaking point because the child is taking up all of one parent’s time, while the other parent and siblings feel neglected.

Learning is the most important thing we do. Not just in school but in absolutely every arena in our lives. Learning problems can affect how we see the world, how we perform at school and work, and our success in relationships. They often limit our options.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Children and adults with learning problems do not have to go through life limited or crippled by them. Learning problems, including diagnosed learning disabilities and dyslexia, can be permanently corrected so that these high potential individuals can have the opportunities and future they deserve.

I feel great urgency to get this message out to parents of children with learning challenges. If the problems are not corrected, children will suffer needlessly. They will often take a lesser path for their future because they don't have the skills or confidence to really pursue their dreams. This lesser path may mean not going to college, moving from job to job, or even a life of crime.

Frankie is a perfect example. I was a Resource Specialist (special education teacher) in public school when twelve-year-old Frankie slunk through my door. Frankie had a reputation of being a tough kid, a *really* tough kid. Even the teachers knew not to mess with Frankie. He was already entrenched in a street gang and had the belligerent attitude to go with it. Frankie was a smart kid going nowhere fast.

I owe a lot to Frankie, first and foremost an apology. I really liked him. And I felt for him. I could see how intelligent he was and how absolutely impossible reading and writing were for him. But I failed him. Like so many teachers, I really cared and I did my best, but at the end of the day, Frankie still couldn't read. And I didn't know how to teach him. I didn't know how to get to the root of the problem. I didn't even know there was a "root."

I also owe Frankie my thanks. He didn't believe he could learn, but somehow, I knew that couldn't be right. I began to search for the answers and started on the journey that has led us here today.

In this book, I want to help you, the parent, find answers.

- Why does your smart child struggle so much?
- Why doesn't anything you've tried seem to be working?
- Could there be something underlying the poor grades that is the real issue?
- If so, what is it? Can it be fixed?
- Is it really possible to correct dyslexia, learning disabilities, or other learning and attention challenges?
- *How* can these issues be corrected?
- Where do you go for help?

There *are* real solutions.

For decades, pioneers in the field of learning, many of whom are listed in the acknowledgements, have been exploring the causes and solutions for learning challenges. Today, the brain research has caught up with the clinicians. We know now that the brain can change. Learning can improve. Those dreams for your child's future can be re-captured. I hope that's what you'll take away from this book: the joy of understanding and hope, and a blueprint for real solutions.

The parent of one of our students recently wrote me this e-mail:

"You need to know, your services have been absolutely invaluable. You have given my daughter a chance to have a happy, productive life instead of one full of disappointments and frustration. Our family is functioning much more calmly as well. For that there are no words to fully express my thanks to you. Thanks for helping. Thanks for caring."

This is your story.

If your child is struggling in school, I believe you will find him or her in these pages. You will recognize yourself and your story. You'll see that you're not alone and you'll find answers. Parents, this is for you. Enjoy!

Jill Stowell, M.S., April 2010

P R E F A C E

There are 3 ideas that I want to share with you before you begin reading. These will help you put the book into perspective and act as a sort of preliminary foundation to what comes next.

First, this book is written from my point of view, based on my experiences over the last three decades working with students with learning challenges both as a public school teacher and a private practice specialist. The stories are all true. The success that our four thousand-plus students have had is real.

So exactly what is my role in all this?

Experts come in many forms. Researchers gather together two groups of students, try a technique on one group, and withhold that technique or program from the other group. In a really good research study, neither the students nor the instructor will know which group they are in.

I am not a researcher. People who come to our center do not want to sacrifice money or time in order to possibly have the best techniques withheld from their child. They come because they want results.

Evaluators (psychologists, psychiatrists, neurologists, pediatricians, testing centers) assess students on a battery of tests to find out if there is a problem and often to give it a label. I am not primarily an evaluator. Parents do not bring their children to us for me to tell them that there is some kind of problem. They already know that. What they want is a different result. That's what we do.

We are "interventionists." Our job is to use assessment results, research findings, and the most effective clinical techniques and programs available to move a student from the abilities that he has to the abilities that will change how he performs in school, in social situations, and in life.

Assessment and research are very valuable. We use information from assessment and research in what we do.

But our job is to take everything we know, take into account what the assessment results show, consider the research we have available to us, mix in experience and intuition, and then practice the art of good teaching.

In some cases, we have made discoveries before all the research has been published. Sometimes we take new research and apply it to what we have to offer students.

The bottom line is that our job is to make changes in what students can do. Much of what we have developed over the years has come when everything we knew how to do simply wasn't working...we weren't getting the changes the student needed. So we would go on a quest to find new ways of fixing learning skills.

Again, all the stories in the book are true. They happened to real students in our clinic. There will be "experts" that refute what we have done. That's OK. Sometimes, what we do flies in the face of traditional approaches and conventional wisdom.

This book is about our experiences in making learning skills work for students over the last 25 years. It has been a thrilling journey that I hope you can benefit from.

Second, this work has been focused on the population of students that fit under the umbrella of "learning disabilities." By definition, that means the student has at least average, but in many cases above average intelligence. The techniques in this book make tremendous changes in those students' abilities.

Having said that, the programs and techniques we use also make changes for other populations. They will not make a child with true mental retardation have average intelligence and they won't generally move an autistic child off the autistic spectrum. But they can greatly increase the functioning, abilities, and quality of life for these students.

Third, I know that what I write here does not fit the popular message about learning disabilities. Even some of the biggest, most powerful organizations who are experts in my field may dispute what I teach. They will tell people that learning disabilities and dyslexia are permanent conditions.

Change happens slowly in this world. Because we have seen the changes students can make, and have done it for such a long time with so many children and adults, I'm confident that at some time in the future, what I write about here will become common knowledge.

Until then, I invite you to read ahead and then go find help for your child. The answers *are* out there.

*Navigating and Understanding the World of
Dyslexia, Learning Disabilities, and Other
Learning and Attention Challenges*

From talking with thousands of parents over the years, I know that when your child has learning or attention problems, you feel confused and alone. Is it your fault? Is it your child's fault? Is it the teacher? Should you be doing something different? What will relatives and friends say if they know your child can't keep up?

Then one day, your smart, beautiful child comes home saying, "I'm the dumbest kid in the class," and you know you have to do something. If you can find someone who will really listen, they don't seem to get it; they don't really hear you. You get confusing messages, and almost everywhere you turn, you're told that your child will just have to live with it. There are no real solutions. You'd better change your dreams. The future will have to look different for *your* child.

Your child is misunderstood, often misdiagnosed, and left to cope. For all of you parents who have been there and think this is unacceptable, this book is for you.

In Part One, we will explore your journey, what's true and what's not about learning challenges and what the underlying roots of the learning, behavior, social, and attention challenges are.

There *are* real and permanent solutions. Your child can achieve the future you know he or she has the potential to have. Part One will help you understand why.

The Faces of Learning Problems

Is your child one of the 14.9 million children in America struggling with reading or school? Who are these children? What do they look like?

In this chapter. . .

- Why a learning problem may be dismissed altogether or attributed to the wrong cause.
- Without proper treatment, learning disabilities typically last a lifetime and are not something children simply outgrow.
- Many children with learning difficulties are very bright.
- Children with learning disabilities are usually doing the best they can, but won't reach their full potential without help.

Chatting with friends and making jokes gets Mike through his day at school. Of course, his teacher is extremely irritated with him for constantly disrupting the class with his talking and his jokes. And she cannot understand how such a smart boy can refuse to do his work and get so little accomplished during the day.

The truth about Mike is that he *is* very intelligent, but he can't read very well. His intelligence gets him by; he can read enough to sometimes get answers right, to sometimes get parts of assignments completed. Unfortunately, he can get just enough done to make it look like he can do it, so when he doesn't, he looks unmotivated.

Mike's teacher thinks he has Attention Deficit Disorder. In reality, Mike is dyslexic. He can't do the work, so he finds other ways to entertain himself. He's getting Fs in 4th grade. Mike's mother sees how hard he tries at home, but even she is frustrated because Mike

can't seem to get any of his homework done without her there helping every minute. Dad is mad because he thinks Mike could do better if he tried harder. And Mike just wants to give up. No matter how hard he tries, he still can't manage to make the grade.

A concussion can trigger learning problems.

Soccer is what Mindy lives for. She's one of the best on her team, and she plans to go to college on a soccer scholarship. That is, if she can get her grades up. Ever since starting high school, Mindy has been struggling more than usual to get good grades in class. In fact, she's only pulling Ds in some classes now.

School has always been hard for Mindy, but she's a worker. She's motivated. So she has sweated blood over the years and gotten pretty good grades, grades that probably would have been good enough when paired with her outstanding ability in soccer.

But shortly before beginning high school, Mindy got a concussion playing soccer. Ever since, her thinking has been more disorganized. She still tries really hard, but somehow, she just can't seem to remember things as well as she used to. She forgets where she put assignments and often doesn't quite understand what the teacher is saying in class. She misunderstands directions and sometimes even gets confused in conversations with her friends. All of this, on top of the reading problems that she worked so hard to compensate for over the years, is making school almost impossible.

Non-stop chatter and lack of focus isolates a child.

Speed is the name of the game for Eddie, an extremely bright, energetic 5th grade boy with boundless energy. Eddie has so much to say that he just knows everyone wants to hear—right now! He's the first one done in class, and his work is usually right. He explodes out to recess the second the bell rings and pesters everyone on the playground with his non-stop chatter and his enthusiastic grabbing at classmates to get them to come along and play.

When recess is over, Eddie can't begin to pull all that energy back in to focus again for another two hours, so he's chattering and popping in and out of his seat constantly. Instead of raising his hand to speak, he blurts out the answers before anyone else has a

chance. He speaks very loudly, and though he is a boy with great intentions and a heart of gold, he has no friends and is driving his teachers crazy.

"Pay attention, Eddie!" has become a mantra in his classes, but try as he might, he just cannot seem to contain his words and keep his body in the chair. His classmates are constantly shushing him, which makes him feel angry. Eddie so desires to have friends and is hurt and confused because no one seems to want to be around him.

When children can't keep up, they assume they're stupid.

Regular kids, with average to above average intelligence are sitting in class, day after day, frustrated and misunderstood by their teachers, parents, classmates, and even themselves. They want to do well in school. They know they should be able to. But somehow, they just can't seem to do it.

Why does it take them so long to finish their work? Why is Johnny, sitting next to them, already finished while they're only on problem number two? Why do they have hours more homework than other kids in their class? Are they just stupid? "Must be," they conclude, "since everyone else seems to be able to do the work more easily."

Surprisingly, these kids exist in every classroom in every school. They might be good at hiding it, but they are suffering nevertheless. Somehow, no matter how good they are at other things, reading or math or some other aspect of school just isn't working out for them as well as it should.

Learning problems can be caused by a variety of factors, but by far, the most common reason for a child to struggle in school is weak learning skills or what you might think of as information processing skills. In her research in the 1970s, Patricia Lindamood found that approximately 30 percent of people across all populations—socio-economic, geographic, ethnic, and age—have some degree of difficulty with processing the sounds in words. This is a critical factor in learning to read and spell. As a result of this factor alone, at least 3 out of 10 children in every classroom and 3 out of 10 adults are less efficient than they could be with reading.

School is a child's job. When learning is difficult, there will almost always be a cost in time, energy, and emotion. If the challenges go uncorrected, the cost may go well beyond grades to affect a child's relationships, self-esteem, and choices.

Struggling to find a place to excel

I recently spoke to a parent who shared that she was at her wit's end over her fourteen-year-old son. He had a history of not doing well in school. He was smart enough and never qualified for any kind of special help at school, but somehow, he didn't seem to understand what was going on in class or what he was supposed to do on assignments . . . so he quit doing them and found other ways to occupy his time. At the time I spoke to his mother, he had just gotten arrested for shoplifting. When asked why he did it, he replied, "At least it's something I'm good at." To my knowledge, this boy never got help for his learning problems. It breaks my heart to think what his future may be like.

How the brain processes information dramatically affects learning.

Michael's story has a similar beginning. Michael was in 8th grade when I met him. He had few friends, and he was literally failing in school. On top of that, he was so anxious about his poor performance in school that he had severe migraines and stomachaches three to four times a week.

Testing revealed that Michael had a serious auditory processing problem. His hearing was normal; his ears could hear, but the messages getting to the brain were not always clear and complete. Listening for Michael was like having a bad cell phone connection *all the time*.

No wonder Michael could not follow directions that were told to him. No wonder he was confused in class and couldn't connect well in conversations. He was getting spotty, partial information. He tried hard to understand, but was missing so much important information that he felt lost all of the time. He was a high achiever at heart, so this caused a tremendous amount of anxiety.

All of this changed for Michael when he began working on improving his listening skills through a specialized *Auditory Stimulation and Training* program at our learning center. Within a few weeks, his headaches and stomachaches began to disappear. By the end of the semester, Michael had made friends and was on the honor roll.

A few years later, I ran into Michael, and he very proudly reported that he was a straight-A student and the ASB president of his high school. Recently, Michael called to tell me that he was one of sixty students in the country who had received early acceptance into the prestigious Brown Medical School.

These two similar boys with similar learning challenges headed down very different paths. Michael shared that the turning point for him was when he started his specialized program of auditory stimulation and training that retrained his brain to listen.

Why children can be excellent in one area and weak in another

Learning disabilities have sometimes been referred to as the "invisible disability." Often, children with serious learning challenges at school exhibit strong abilities and talents in other areas. I have witnessed the creation of incredible Lego structures in my waiting room from children who stammer and stumble over simple reading passages. Recently, I met a young man who is brilliant in physics and chemistry, but who takes hours to read a chapter in his history book. Children who cannot spell or write a good paragraph are sometimes wonderful storytellers.

Children with learning disabilities often have what seem like extreme strengths and weaknesses. They may excel in sports or in artistic, creative, or mechanical arenas. They may be the one the family turns to when something is broken, because somehow, they can just "see" how to fix it. One of our most challenged learners when it comes to attention, reading, writing, and math, has already planned out the intricate details of an invention that he's going to create for his school science fair.

This is one of the confusing things about children with learning challenges. How can they be so talented in one area but do

so poorly in others? It is encouraging to know that many actors, inventors, business leaders, and sports celebrities had dyslexia or other learning disabilities and “made it.” But it’s also important to keep in mind that only a very few people actually win the Olympics, build Fortune 500 companies, or invent something life-changing like the light bulb. We need to celebrate the accomplishments and strengths of our children, but we cannot assume that a child’s talents will override his challenges if he struggles with learning.

I once had a dad say of his eleven-year-old son, “He doesn’t need to read well. He’s going to be a professional ball player.” I sincerely hope that was true, but at eleven years old, do we really want to count on that?

Growing up doesn’t mean growing out of learning challenges.

Getting out of high school can sometimes be a relief to students with learning challenges, but just because they grow up doesn’t mean that the learning challenges go away. Those who go on to college often find that in spite of their determination, they have to work much harder and longer than their peers, and it’s hard to stick with it.

Bright men and women who were frustrated and challenged as children in school often find themselves in unfulfilling jobs, unemployment lines, or worse yet, in jail. Underachievement and frustration in school because of learning challenges, unfortunately, often leads to underachievement and frustration in life and relationships outside of school as well.

John was a stuntman in the movies. He had graduated from high school unable to read and was still a non-reader at twenty-six when I met him. As successful as he was in the movie industry, he wasn’t where he wanted to be because of his reading disability. He shared that he didn’t want to “beat-up his body” being a stuntman for the rest of his life; he wanted to act. But, of course, he couldn’t go to auditions where he had to read, and he lived in fear that someone might find out and he’d be kicked off the set as a danger because he couldn’t read the signs.

John had a job, but it wasn’t the one he wanted, and the embarrassment and frustration he had lived with through school, followed him into his adult life. Eventually, that frustration led John to get the kind of help that could solve his dyslexia and open the door for the acting career he desired.

What does it feel like to live with a learning challenge?

What does it mean if you’re the child in the neighborhood that has a learning challenge? For twelve-year-old Jenny, it means you feel stupid because you study all the time and you get Ds and Fs on most of your papers anyway. For nine-year-old Robbie, it means that you’re angry and ready to fight all the time because kids on the playground make fun of you for going to a special class.

Andy is worried that he won’t get to play sports next semester in high school because he can’t keep his grades up. He lives for sports and doesn’t know how he’s going to take it if he can’t do the one thing he really feels good at.

Kailee is in 2nd grade and has already figured out that if she’s really helpful and really nice, she can sometimes get out of doing her work in class. When she takes it home, her mom sits with her and helps her get it all done right. So far, no one at school knows Kailee’s secret. But Kailee knows she can’t do the work the way everyone else can, and she has stomachaches everyday.

Josh is the class clown. Sure, he gets in trouble a lot for disrupting the class, but he’s really funny. Even the teacher laughs sometimes and the kids really like him. As long as he can talk and entertain people, nobody seems to realize that he can’t do the work.

Most students with learning challenges have at least average to above average intelligence. They’re capable kids who know they should be doing better. They deal with it in different ways, but the bottom line is that having difficulty learning is painful, embarrassing, and confusing. It affects how they feel about themselves, the choices they make, their relationships, and their future.

Families are affected by learning challenges as well. Often, the child who is struggling needs so much help and attention that other children in the family feel neglected. Battles over homework take

their toll on time and energy for other activities. And for parents, it is heartbreaking to watch their child struggle and not know how to fix it.

Learning challenges can affect more than schoolwork.

Sometimes, learning problems are almost exclusively related to schoolwork or reading, but many times, the underlying challenges causing the problems in school carry over into life in general. Do you see your child in any of these examples?

- Andy never knows where he's supposed to be on the soccer field.
- Kenny always seems to swing too early in baseball practice.
- Rachel walks on her toes.
- Sam is nine and still doesn't know how to ride a bike.
- Sally seems to be in a world of her own, always happy, but always drifting around with no real sense of direction.
- Cal hates change and gets really upset when anything in the family schedule changes.
- Kara keeps failing her driving test because she can't parallel park.
- Mandy is bossy and demands her own way or she doesn't want to play.
- Danny talks non-stop and monopolizes every conversation at Boy Scouts and in his church youth group.
- Aiden can't carry on a conversation on the phone.
- Alan's moods are up and down. He's smart and talented but "down" most of the time.
- Cindy is awkward and doesn't understand social space so she makes people uncomfortable.
- David is going in 4th grade, but he still gets anxious whenever he goes somewhere without a parent.

- Nick does everything his friends tell him to do because he's too timid to say no.
- Alexis has never been to a birthday party because she doesn't have any friends.

Correct diagnosis and treatment changes lives.

Life is all about learning. The root causes of academic struggles show up in other areas of a child's life. These things may baffle and confuse parents, but are often passed off as personality traits, quirks, or preferences.

One of the things we love about fixing underlying learning skills is that not only do school learning problems get resolved, but other aspects of life seem to become easier and more fluid as well. Parents often comment that their child seems "more confident and mature." Maturity is more than just a matter of time. It occurs as children gain more awareness, internal organization, and control.

Friendships are one of the most heartwarming outcomes of improved underlying learning skills. One of our nineteen-year-old clients who had always had trouble making friends, shared after four weeks of sound therapy that he had gone out that weekend and met some new people and actually talked to them. He said, "They treated me like a *leader* and acted like they really *liked* me!" So often, the underlying challenges that affect academic progress also get in the way of social relationships.

It is with great respect and passion that I write this book about solving learning challenges. The students mentioned are real, though names have been changed. These are amazing individuals of all ages, who are smart, motivated, and every bit as deserving of a promising future as every other child in their school. They may look lazy. They may look like underachievers. They may have developed irritating coping strategies.

But these students want desperately to succeed and are working with so much more effort and energy than anyone would guess. They plug away for years through the discouragement of poor performance. They should be applauded, and they should be helped.

Throughout this book, I will refer to “children.” I intend this to include teens, but the learning challenges and solutions presented here are not exclusive to children and teens. They are just as applicable to the millions of adults with dyslexia, ADHD, and other learning challenges.

Parents hate seeing their children struggling or in pain. When a child has difficulty learning, parents often don’t know where to turn. Or they are immobilized by too many opinions and conflicting messages. My goal in this book is to help you, the parent, gain a better understanding of the problem, and most importantly, the solutions. Yes! These are real solutions that remove barriers to learning and truly open the way to a brighter future.

Action items. . .

- Read this book with sticky notes or a highlighter in hand to mark the sections that apply to your child.
- Change your mindset from frustration to hope because proper diagnosis and drug-free treatment can solve the underlying problems causing most learning challenges.
- Go to www.LearningDisability.com. Under “Free Articles,” read:
 - * “7 Things Every Parent Should Know about Learning Challenges.”
- Go to www.FixLearningSkills.com.
 - * Listen to “The Many Faces of Learning Problems.”
 - * Watch the video, “What if. . .”

*7 Myths and the Truth
about Learning Problems*

*Find out how common beliefs about learning problems
are crippling children and adults who have them.*

In this chapter. . .

- Seven common myths that haunt children with learning disabilities
- Why it’s so confusing for both parents and children to reconcile poor performance in smart children
- The revolutionary truth that many experts completely deny

**Overcoming learning disabilities paves the way
for a child to reach his full potential.**

Bright-eyed, nine-year-old Darren walked into my office with a bounce in his step. He was such a “together” kid, conversing easily with me, polite to his mom, interesting and interested in everything. You would never know it by looking at him or talking to him, but Darren couldn’t read. Not a word!

Darren’s reading goal for the year in his special education class was: “Darren will read ten survival words.” Ten words in a whole year? Nobody believed this boy would ever read! But Darren’s mom would not settle for her intelligent, gregarious, verbal child being a non-reader for life. She could not buy into the myth that once dyslexic always dyslexic.

Darren and his mom worked with us at the learning center in specialized programs to solve the underlying issues causing his confusion with sounds and letters. By the time he was in junior high school, he was no longer in special education, and no one believed

that he had ever had a reading problem. Darren took Advanced Placement classes in high school and graduated with honors. When I last saw him, he was a happy, confident theater major in college. That's a long way from learning ten survival words in a year of school.

Many children don't get the chance that Darren did, because many parents and teachers don't know that the myths about learning problems simply aren't true.

Myth #1: People with learning challenges just aren't that smart.

Joe drags himself to school everyday, wishing he could hide under a rock. It's so embarrassing when he gets called on to read in class and his classmates or teacher have to help him with most of the words. He tries desperately to use the words he knows to help him figure out the ones he doesn't, but it takes so much time. If only there were more pictures in the 6th grade text. Then he could piece together the story and sound like he knew what he was doing. Ha! Maybe he's just stupid. That's what the class bully says out loud and what all the other kids are probably saying to themselves.

Many people believe that students who struggle with reading or other aspects of school just aren't that smart. Take Joe, for example. He didn't begin learning to read until he was twelve.

But let's fast-forward nine years. By the time he was twenty-one, Joe had figured out how to play the stock market so well that he was a millionaire. When I met him twenty years later he was a multi-millionaire. That doesn't sound like a guy who wasn't that smart!

Students with learning disabilities are smart enough and often smarter than average.

By definition, students diagnosed with learning disabilities have at least average to above average intelligence. Many of the students who come through our clinic are very bright or even gifted. This is one of the things that is so confusing for parents, relatives, and teachers. They can see that the student appears bright, but certain aspects of learning at school simply elude her. It just doesn't seem to match up.

Myth #2: "These kids don't really have a problem. They're just lazy. They need to try harder."

Vince's parents were heartbroken—heartbroken and elated—when they learned that Vince had auditory processing weaknesses which were causing his problems in school. They were elated because now maybe something could be done to help him reach his potential and feel better about himself, but heartbroken because for years they had accused Vince of being lazy. They had punished him for not trying harder. Understanding the real cause of his poor performance made everything make sense.

Vince had trouble following directions. He never seemed to be sure what his homework was. He always seemed to be operating with a partial set of information. Even in conversation, he seemed a little lost. Vince "tried harder" for many years, but by the time he was in high school, he'd figured out that "trying harder" wasn't working, so he just quit trying at all.

Learning problems can be disguised as laziness.

In our twenty-five years of working with children and adults with various learning challenges, I have yet to meet a student who was truly lazy. "Lazy" is a symptom but is rarely, if ever, the real issue. When students aren't doing their work, it's most likely because they don't have a complete enough set of skills to do the job.

In Vince's case, his auditory processing delays caused him to miss just enough information that he would think he understood the lesson or assignment, but when he sat down to do the work, he was really confused. He'd sit and stare at the page, hoping it would somehow make sense to him, but eventually, he became unwilling to put out the effort.

For years, Vince's parents had helped him go over and over information for tests, but when the questions were stated differently than the way he had studied, he just couldn't make the connection. How many times are we willing to put out great amounts of effort only to fail? Surprisingly, those "lazy" looking kids with learning challenges often hang in there far longer than most people would tolerate.

Myth #3: Kids who do poorly in school just don't care. They're unmotivated.

Getting your double axel is a big deal for an ice skater. It's one of those really huge, really difficult milestones. I know this because my daughter is a figure skater. At twelve years old, she really wanted two things: to get her double axel and to have a pair of Doc Martins (shoes). I certainly wasn't inclined to buy a hundred-dollar pair of shoes for a girl whose feet were still growing.

But Christy was almost there with her double axel, so close her coach could taste it! One day, he told her he would give her a hundred dollar bill if she would land the double axel right now. Was she motivated? Absolutely! Did she land it? No. Her coach would never offer her that deal now, since she can practically do a double axel in her sleep, but at the time, she just didn't quite have the skills. If you don't have the skills to do the job, it really doesn't matter how motivated you are.

Lack of skills, not lack of motivation, is often the issue.

Imagine that every time you open a book to read the page looks like this to you:

Mha tif baqe the lookeb lik eth is when you rtied
ot reab? Would yon relaly wauf to read? Moulb
it make ony wanj ot try harber or jnst wnatto thorm
the dook onutthe min dow?

How motivated would you be to read? And even if you were highly motivated, how well would you do? My experience with children with learning challenges is that they care deeply. If they look unmotivated, it's a symptom, not the problem. Sometimes, it's just easier to fail on purpose than to know you tried your best and failed anyway.

Myth #4: If you aren't diagnosed learning disabled, dyslexic, or ADHD, then you don't have a learning problem. Nothing's wrong.

When children are struggling with reading, math, or some other aspect of learning, parents usually know. Moms know for sure. But sometimes when a parent asks for testing at school, they're told that there's nothing wrong, that their child is doing fine.

Other times, children do go through the testing but don't qualify for special education services at school.

When a child doesn't fit the diagnosis of learning disability, dyslexia, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, the common belief is that there is nothing wrong. The child just isn't that smart or needs to try harder. Families go back to toughing it out through hours of homework, tears, and discouragement, wondering what they might have done to cause this.

The truth is that most learning challenges are caused by a weakness in one or more areas of underlying learning skills. These are not academic skills, like reading and writing, but the brain's information processing skills. If we are going to learn, we have to be able to take in accurate and complete information through our senses, remember it, think about it, and organize it for learning. We call these "learning skills."

The "official" criteria for learning disabilities misses many children who need help.

Only about five to nine percent of school-age children are diagnosed with learning disabilities, but research tells us that *at least* 30 percent have some degree of weakness with underlying processing or learning skills. This means that 21–25 percent of the children in school will never formally qualify as learning disabled but struggle to learn nevertheless.

When a parent brings a child to our clinic, we want to know what the challenges look like in real life: at home, in school, on the playground, and doing homework. What academic areas are affected? Then we begin our search to find out what underlying learning skills are not supporting the student well enough. The challenges are real, whether formally diagnosed or not, and the underlying learning skills are the place to begin to correct them.

Myth #5: Children with learning problems just need time. They'll grow out of it.

"Don't worry, he's a boy! Give him time. He'll grow out of it." How many parents have heard these words from well-meaning teachers and relatives, only to regret not taking action sooner?

If maturity is truly the issue behind difficulties in school, then time is the answer. But retaining a child in a grade level or just waiting for her to grow up will not solve a learning disability or a learning skills problem.

Kevin was a little boy full of the boundless energy that four-and-a-half-year-olds have. He was coordinated, smart, and talkative. He was scheduled to begin kindergarten in the fall in a very academic school. He would be almost five. But Kevin had no interest in letters or numbers or worksheets in preschool. His name writing and copying were immature. Kevin's preschool teacher wisely advised his parents to give him time by putting him in pre-kindergarten in September.

For Kevin, this was a very good decision. His challenge with school was not a learning disability. He was simply young, chronologically and developmentally. Another year of maturity before hitting the academic scene was exactly what he needed.

Mark was seven when his teacher suggested that he be retained in first grade. He was friendly, talkative, charming, and coordinated. But he couldn't read. He still couldn't say the names of all the letters and when he "read" in his reading book, he simply looked at the pictures and made up a story. Mark turned letters upside down or backwards when writing and at seven years old was already "losing" his papers and coming up with clever excuses for not doing his work.

Mark had a strong dyslexic thinking style. Time and maturity were not going to change that. In fact, another year in first grade, without the right kind of intervention to solve the reading challenges would only serve to erode his confidence and make him feel like a failure. He'd be taller and older, but he'd still be way behind the others.

Left untreated, learning disabilities are life-long hindrances.

A learning skills or processing problem is not something that a child grows out of. It accompanies him and frustrates him into adulthood. Age just allows him to find better ways to get around it. Mark learned to avoid reading by asking to go to the bathroom or the nurse. His father, also dyslexic, found a more grown-up way to

avoid reading. He went into his own business and hired someone to do any reading and writing that was required.

Myth #6: The best way to help someone with a learning problem is to help him get around it—to make accommodations.

Ten-year-old Jake was a smart boy with serious learning problems in the areas of auditory processing, reading, writing, and math. To help him at school, Jake was given a one-to-one instructional aide who sat with him in class. Jake couldn't understand the teacher's instructions, so his aide repeated them more slowly and simply. He couldn't do the math or reading that the rest of the students were doing, so his aide worked with him in the back of the class doing lower level work. With her at his side, Jake could get some work done. But he wasn't progressing, and the problem wasn't changing. Jake was getting through school, but he wasn't becoming independent. What would the future look like for him when his aide wasn't there?

Tony was a young adult with a reading disability. He'd figured out some very clever accommodations for himself. He'd apply for jobs with a sling on his arm so that he'd have an excuse to take the application home where someone could read it and write it for him. He'd always order last in a restaurant so that he could order the same thing as someone else. He'd press the record button on his answering machine whenever someone was giving him an address or directions that needed to be written down.

Adapting rather than solving underlying problems is a stop-gap measure.

Accommodations, such as more time on tests, having tests read to them, giving oral rather than written reports, and having fewer spelling words, are common and helpful to students struggling in school. The problem is that accommodations are not addressing the real issue; they're just helping students live with it.

Accommodating a learning problem is like riding a bike with a flat tire. With lots of extra effort and someone holding the seat, it can be done. But wouldn't it be better just to fix the flat tire? Tony was a great guy and obviously very inventive to have come up with

such creative ways to get around his dyslexia, but he felt so much more confident and independent once he got help to fix the underlying learning skills that had kept him from being able to learn to read and write on his own.

Myth #7: A learning problem is a permanent condition.

Jan had always believed what her parents, teachers, and doctor believed: that her dyslexia was a permanent condition. When Jan found out that her nine-year-old daughter Leah also had learning disabilities, she refused to buy into the myth anymore. Her pain was one thing, but she was not about to watch her daughter go through what she had.

Jan got help for Leah and was relieved to see that once Leah's underlying learning skills improved, she was able to learn to read and write. When Leah made the honor roll in 4th grade, Jan was inspired to get help for herself. She went through the same kind of cognitive training and reading remediation programs that Leah had gone through. Then she went to college—something she had always wanted to do—and was thrilled to report that the first A she had ever received was in her college English class.

Good news! Learning disabilities don't have to be permanent.

For twenty-five years, we have seen the lives of thousands of children and adults changed by permanently solving their learning challenges, including dyslexia and other learning disabilities. We now live in a remarkable world where brain research is possible. In the last twenty years, brain research has validated that the brain can change, not just during a small window of time in childhood, but anytime. With specific, intensive training, the brain can learn to think about and process information in new and more efficient ways.

To all of you parents who refused to believe the myth, you were right. A learning problem does NOT have to be a permanent condition.

Action items. . .

- Go to www.LearningDisability.com.
Under "Free Articles" read:
 - * "Not Just Laziness."
 - * "Maybe He's Just Lazy!"
- Go to www.FixLearningSkills.com.
 - * Listen to "3 Myths About Learning Problems."