



Learning Difficulties - Reading the Signs

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All children, at some stage or other, struggle with their school work. Starting a new class, tackling a new subject or just doing homework can see a child struggle to keep up.

Yet, there are many children whose performance over time just doesn't keep pace with the other children in class, or, for that matter, their performance doesn't seem to match their intellectual capabilities. Indeed, there are many children struggling in school because of undetected learning difficulties and need extra help to achieve their best.

There is probably as many as 10% of children in schools across the UAE experiencing learning difficulties. Studies in learning problems conducted in the UK have suggested that at least 5% of children in school are affected by learning difficulties while studies in the US have put the figure at some 15%, but based on our experience over the past 3 years in Dubai, the figure is probably as high as 10% for the UAE.

Children with learning difficulties often fall behind and even suffer at school. The signs are subtle and it often requires a professional assessment to determine the nature of the problem. To most people, the child with learning difficulties just doesn't seem to perform well. To the teacher, such children appear to be lazy, producing messy work and poor handwriting. Teachers say things like: 'They don't try hard enough'. 'They have trouble sitting still in class and are always bumping into others and causing trouble'. While parents, too, can often miss the signs, it can be quite distressing for them to see their child falling behind at school or to see them taking so long to do things and often doing them in the wrong order.

However, having a learning difficulty is not a sentence: It is not a life-long condition that can't be helped. A learning difficulty is often the outcome of a dysfunction in the sensory integration network of the body and children with learning difficulties can receive attention to correct or mitigate the underlying condition.

The term 'learning difficulty' describes a range of conditions and is used differently in different countries. Here, the term is used to describe general learning problems that stem from delay in a child's development. Where a child's motor, sensory or cognitive

development has been slow, such development delay can affect specific learning abilities and is often noticed at school in subjects as such writing, reading and spelling.

Many times, learning difficulties are the result of poor sensory integration of information-input and communication in the brain. When information is 'sensed' by the brain, it needs to be organised in order for a plan of action, or response, to take place. Sometimes children can experience a traffic-jam of sensory information that needs to be sorted in order for the brain to function properly and allow the child to increase their learning capabilities. Sensory integration therapy seeks to correct this dysfunction.

While all this may sound new to parents, and certainly like good news to parents with children facing these problems, the work in sensory integration has been going since the 1960s. The concept of sensory integration comes from a body of work developed by Dr Jean Ayres from California in the 1960s and 1970s. As an occupational therapist, Dr Ayres was interested in the way in which sensory processing and motor planning disorders interfere with daily-life function and learning. By way of definition, sensory integration is the ability to take in, sort out, process and make use of information from the world about us. Information about one's own body and the world is gathered from 7 senses: touch (tactile sense), movement (vestibular sense), body position (proprioception), sight, sound, smell and taste. The processing of sensory information is called sensory integration.

Parents of a child with dysfunction in sensory integration will have noticed differences in their child. For example, that he may not be able to sit still despite being able to run and jump, or he may climb the highest climbing frame yet may have poor balance. Parents often see that there is a problem but can't quite 'put their finger on it'. But recognising the problem will help families understand the child's needs and providing support.

Some of the signs of dysfunction in sensory integration are:

Overly sensitive to touch, movement, sights or sounds

- The child avoids touching, or being touched by objects or people. He may show fearful reactions to movement or get aggressive or simply run away.

Under reaction to touch, movement, sights or sounds

- The child does not register sensory experiences adequately. He may be easily distracted or may not feel pain or get dizzy in the same way as other children do.

Co-ordination problems

- The child may show a difficulty in whole body movements or fine hand movements. They may have been slow in developing hand dominance in writing, resulting in problems in formal schooling.

Difficulties in organisation of behaviour

- The child may have difficulty in planning and carrying out everyday activities. Examples include trouble getting dressed, difficulty following teacher's instructions, and getting from one class to another.

Delay in speech and language development

- As speech is such an important skill in children, parents often notice a difficulty in this area before any other. A speech delay can often be a sign of other underlying sensory integration or motor development problems.

Difficulties in activities of daily living

- The child with reduced sense of movement, poor body and touch perception will take longer to become independent in daily life skills.

Difficulty in learning

- Typically, children show difficulties in handwriting, reading and spelling.

Recognising the problems a child is facing plays a big part in helping them. Early identification is, of course, important and parents often feel that the most important thing they can do for their child is to seek professional help. At the same time, it is important to say that the role parents play in understanding and supporting their child is exceedingly valuable.

First, parents can help a child's self esteem by providing reassurance and building their confidence. Children know they are different, or who get told they are different by other children and adults, need their parents love and care to help them through the ups and downs.

Second, parents can seek to control the child's environment to meet his needs. By observing the child, parents can see how their child responds to various situations and, by understanding their child's movements in perspective, control the environment accordingly.

Third, parents can help their child learn through play. A child with sensory integration difficulties often finds regular toys and games too difficult to play with. Yet, play is how a child learns to master their environment and parents can ensure their child has opportunities to play in the home, in the yard or in the playground.

If a parent feels that their child is having learning difficulties that may be caused by sensory integration problems, it is advisable to have a child assessed by a qualified occupational therapist. Assessments should involve internationally recognised tests that evaluate a range of sensory-motor, perceptual, and functional skills. In using sensory integration therapy to correct disorders, the therapist will seek to facilitate child-centred treatment sessions. While the child is having fun at play, the therapist will seek to feed the child's sensory-diet by seeking those activities (sensory experiences) that are most beneficial for their development. Thus, a child is guided through activities that challenge

his ability to respond appropriately to sensory input by making a successful organised response.

While parents can be reluctant to admit that their child may have a learning problem, the earlier they seek to address any problem and get support the better. After they see improvements in their children, parents come to see that therapy is one of the best things they could have done for their child. One parent on starting therapy for their child this year said: “Therapy has enabled my boy to experience the world in a whole new way”, while another said: “Therapy is not only having a noticeable benefit for my kids but they love doing it as well.”

Having a learning difficulty is not a sentence but ignoring it wont help it go away either.

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