



THE CENTRE FOR HEALTHY LIVING

Understanding learning difficulties

What's the problem?

It is important that the nature of children's and teenagers' learning difficulties be understood because it has such a big impact on their self-esteem and future prospects. In many cases, the distracting behaviour they engage in at home or in the classroom may be a cover for frustration or embarrassment at the difficulty an otherwise bright child has in processing complex auditory information.

They may be seen as lazy, or worse, as unintelligent, when they really have a specific learning disability. As the following stories show, failure to identify the real problem may lead a child to disengage from school.



Many children struggle with reading because of basic problems encoding sound in the brain.



Children with learning difficulties may also have issues with low muscle tone and clumsiness, resulting in greater injuries if they play sport.

The difficulties children may experience

Steven's story

At fourteen, Steven was a teenager with low self-esteem who was underachieving at school and becoming increasingly negative about his future. His poor self-image stemmed partly from difficulties he had with schoolwork, and he described himself as "dumb". This led to school avoidance, staying home and spending time watching TV and playing on his computer. He had difficulty making friends and was so uncoordinated that at 14 he still could not tie his shoelaces. He was unwilling to participate in sport.

Back in Grade 1, Steven was reading well above his year level, and he continued to do well with reading throughout primary school. However, his Grade 1 teacher commented with regard to his Mathematics ability: "Steven has the basic knowledge but makes many mistakes because he does not listen to directions. Steven finds it **difficult to follow directions and tends to become confused.**" Subsequent teachers each year commented on his difficulty concentrating and remaining on task, his difficulties organizing himself, his need to listen more and the need for constant reminders to keep him working, yet the underlying problem was not recognized.

In Grade 6, Steven was seen by a paediatrician who diagnosed Attention Deficit Disorder and prescribed Ritalin despite the fact that throughout his primary school years Steven had been described by teachers as accepting responsibility, being punctual, having courtesy and consideration, respecting authority and the rights of others. He was described as taking pride in his work and having the ability to persist in the face of difficulties. His main problems were difficulty working in a group and mixing with peers and being poor in self-organization and his use of time. Internal speech which is needed for these activities is poor when a child has difficulty processing sound.



A student might find it hard to present a project or participate in drama because of their slower rate of processing auditory information.

Don't diagnose without a comprehensive assessment

The underlying basis of some learning problems are not obvious and children's needs and their behaviour can be misunderstood. This is particularly true of children with attention problems, since lack of attention is not a simple issue and has many causes.

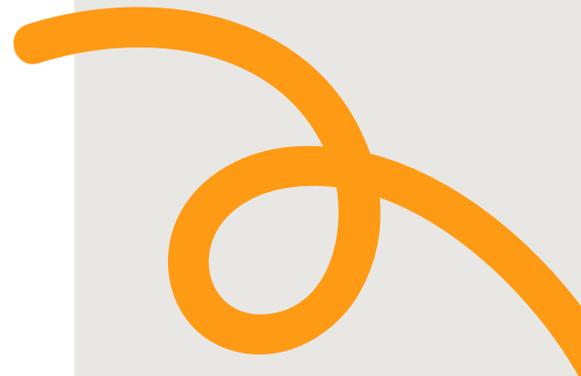
We believe that children should not be diagnosed with attention problems such as ADHD and prescribed stimulant drugs without a comprehensive assessment.

An inability to listen and to follow instructions, and difficulties with organization may, for example, be due to a nonverbal learning disability, with problems with attention arising secondary to an inability to process complex information.

Mental health issues are common

Unfortunately, it is often thought that these children are not motivated to learn and they are constantly being urged to try harder. This can compound problems they already have with self-esteem.

Our concern for children like Steven is that failure to understand the nature of their real strengths and weaknesses can lead to mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and poor self-esteem.



Understanding the underlying basis of a child's difficulties can lead to more options for helping them such as specific strategies for teaching, and providing a structured classroom environment and routine.

Fortunately, through detailed assessments of a child's needs, the CAN DO Program is able to offer treatment rather than just remedial strategies, dealing with the 'noisy brain' with biomedical herbs and improving auditory processing through specific training.

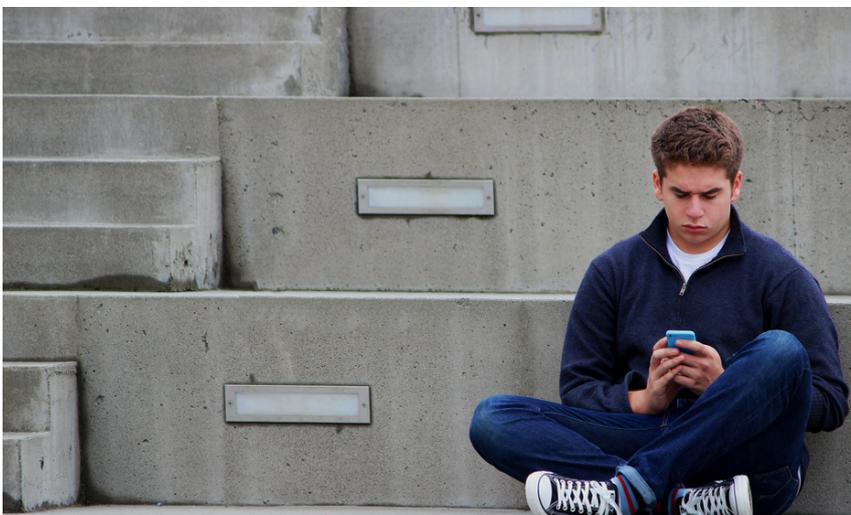
Michael's story

Even though Michael had above average verbal fluency and memory skills, and intellectual capacity, by the time he was fourteen he was often unsettled at school and falling behind in his school work. He was having problems concentrating and as a result was being disruptive in class. Psychological tests revealed that although he could do most tasks at the level expected for his age or above, he had difficulty with auditory attention and particularly with complex tasks requiring auditory processing. This meant that he had difficulty paying attention when listening, and then following the instructions that he heard.

He had a good visual memory and could recall things if he had seen them or they were written down. He could remember what he had heard if he was asked straight away, but he had real difficulty remembering information such as a list of names or dates if there was a delay.

The fact that his delayed memory was particularly poor means that Michael had difficulty learning just by listening to what the teacher was saying. If he had been given the same information visually, it is likely that he would do much better. When Michael was asked to remember a story he did extremely well as he was able to use his strong visual skills to create a picture or movie of the story in his mind.

However, as students compare their own abilities with their peers, they may become aggressive or withdrawn. In Michael's case he became disruptive in class, and was the class clown, to deflect attention away from his difficulties. If a parent or teacher just uses verbal communication it can create overload and the student will become inattentive because they become lost in the words being said.



When their self-image is poor, they may become depressed and isolated

Develop their strengths

It is very important to look for and cultivate the genuine talents each child has. Finding an activity at which he or she can excel is an effective way of improving a student's self-esteem. Reassurance rarely helps, as the student is only too well aware of his or her difficulties. Genuine achievement promotes self-esteem, which in turn helps the child to grow and further display his or her natural talents.



Make sure to have photos that match your stories well too. The key to compelling newsletters is a fantastic combination of awesome text and brilliant pictures that complement the story you want to get across.

In their studies they can compensate by using their strong visual skills, and teachers may find that giving them information visually (e.g., lists with diagrams or pictures) helps them to focus in class. Where they need to learn abstract information, it should be broken down into small chunks and learned over several occasions rather than just one. At all times they need to be helped to understand the meaning of what they are learning and creating visual models, charts or diagrams, using colour and shape will help them to absorb information.



Strengths in visual skills means they may get a lot of enjoyment from succeeding in playing computer games and using visual aids at school.

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