

Help! My child isn't Learning

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There seem to be more and more children who are experiencing difficulty learning in the classroom situation. Many of those have no specific diagnosis of a problem like dyslexia, dyspraxia etc, but parents and teachers are aware that some children are having difficulty which seems unexplainable, given that the child has above average intelligence and appears to be normal in all other respects. So, why then does learning seem to be so difficult for the child?

It could be due to the fact that some children are not physically ready for the formal learning process. It is important to note that your child's physical development is closely linked to his/her intellectual development. As Goddard (2002) states, "all learning takes place in the brain, but it is the body which acts as a vehicle by which knowledge is acquired". Education today seems to be focused on developing intellectual skills at the expense of physical skills. There is great emphasis on computer literacy and higher level thinking skills, but it is a huge mistake to think the mind and body are separate entities. In order to utilize the intellectual skills that a child possesses it is necessary that he/she has a body that is coordinated and integrated.

It is very important for all children to move and develop their bodies as well as their minds. The brain and the body work together through the central nervous system, but both are dependent on the senses for all the information about the outer world. In order to develop sensory integration, the child needs to go through the various stages of development in a sequential order and each stage is a necessary part of normal development.

Sequence of Development of various Motor Skills

Age	Skill
3-5 months	Rolling
6 months	Sitting unsupported
8 – 12 months	Crawling
12 – 18 months	Walking
18 months – 2 years	Jumping – two feet together
3 – 3 1/2 years	Hopping
4 – 4 1/2 years	Skipping

Each of the skills in the chart is a necessary part of preparing the body for future learning.

Tummy time: Tummy time helps to develop upper body strength and allows the child to learn to lift his/her head off the ground, push up on hands and opens the fingers so they are able to take the weight when crawling begins.

Rolling: This is one of the early stages that helps with the development of the vestibular (balance) system. It is a necessary part of developing muscle tone. Rolling on to the tummy is preparation for getting into a position where movement can start. A baby should roll from front to back and back to front as well as from side to side in order for equal muscle development to take place.

Sitting unsupported: In the past parents were encouraged to prop their child in a sitting position using cushions and the like until the lower back was developed enough to be able to take the child's weight. However, present thinking suggests that rather than teach the child to sit, it is better to allow the child sit by themselves when their muscle tone has developed sufficiently. The child should rather be encouraged to crawl and move than to rush the child into an upright position. Children who sit for long periods of time are prone to become "bottom shufflers" and thus miss out the important stage of crawling. Baby product manufacturers are very good at leading you to believe that you couldn't possibly be without items like walkers, jolly jumpers or exersaucers. There is nothing wrong with these products if they are used in moderation, but unfortunately, they tend to become a convenient "babysitter" and the child is missing out on valuable time that should be spent on the floor exploring the world around them. A baby is meant to spend the first few months of his/her life lying down. Nature did not intend a baby to be in an upright position until his/her muscle tone was sufficiently developed.

Crawling: This is a very important stage of development. It is at this stage that cross patterning in the brain takes place and the communication pathways are developed between the two hemispheres of the brain. The more pathways there are, the greater the efficiency of brain function. A baby crawls on average for 400 hours before walking. Some babies begin by commando crawling and then move on to crawling on hands and knees, while others start straight into crawling on all fours.

Functions of crawling:

- The development of laterality (the awareness that I have two sides to my body and that they can work independently or together)
- Helping with eye development. The crawling movement helps to change the focal length as the child looks from the finger tips upwards to its world
- The hands and fingers are strengthened in preparation for later development of the "pincer grip" and handwriting skills
- Upper body muscle tone is developed and the child is able to explore and experience his/her world.

Jumping – two feet together: When the child jumps, the two feet need to leave the ground at the same time. Jumping encourages the development of laterality. Children who have a good command of laterality will have developed a preferred hand and will be able to do things like pedal a bike and use the arms when swimming. Many of the skills the child needs at school to develop handwriting and reading requires the child to have developed a preferred side i.e. right eye, right ear, right foot and right hand. Some children may prefer the left side. It is better to have a preferred or dominant side rather than have what is referred to as mixed dominance. That is, for example where the left eye may be dominant, but the child is right-handed. Mixed dominance causes problems with auditory and visual processing, particularly when too much information is given at one time.

These stages of development are an integral part of learning. Each stage needs to be practiced over and over again for the skill to become automatic. When these skills involving the body are automatic, the child is then able to focus on higher thinking skills as he/she is only able to focus on one cognitive (thinking) task at a time. Therefore, with the emphasis on a more sedentary lifestyle, children are not moving as much and are not developing the movement skills that are vital for future learning.

Goddard (2006) states that “movement is the child’s first language and it is through movement that he/she first starts to explore the world and to gain control over his/her body”. Therefore “the more proficient they become at their first language, the better they will develop other powers of expression, exploration and development” (SPARC – Active movement, 2004). Rowe (1995) noted that the most advanced level of movement is the ability to stay completely still. Therefore, in order for a child to be able to function in a classroom where he/she is expected to stand still or sit still, the child needs to have complete control over movement. If this is not the case, then the child does not have the necessary basic equipment for learning in the classroom. We are often so focused on the mind and academic learning, that the important role that movement plays is overlooked. It is important to remember that movement is at the heart of learning. Language and behavior, as well as learning are all linked in some way to the function of the motor system and the control of movement. A child who has gained control of his/her body is then able to exercise self-control. Most academic learning is dependent on basic skills becoming automatic at the physical level. Therefore, if a child does not develop automatic control over balance and co-ordination, many other aspects of learning may be affected, even if the child is of average or above average intelligence (Goddard, 2002).

When a child experiences difficulty learning it causes distress to not only the child but also the parents and teachers. In the absence of any other diagnosis, it could be that physical factors underlie the learning difficulty. Each child deserves to develop to his/her full potential and difficulty with learning should not stand in the way of that happening.

Help is available for those who find learning a challenge. At Smart Learning Solutions, we can assess your child and determine whether or not there are any physical factors underlying their difficulty in learning. We can assess co-ordination and balance, aberrant reflexes, oculomotor and perceptual-motor difficulties which could be impacting their learning.

For more information you can contact Glynis Brummer on (09) 534 7954 or 021 144 1412.