

childPSYCH News

A newsletter for professionals and parents

Inside this issue:

Learning Difficulties and Children	1
My child doesn't need speech therapy. They can talk!	2
Children Eating Dirt	2

We're on the web
www.childpsych.net.au

Special points of interest:

A useful website for teachers and parents of children with learning difficulties is:
www.ldonline.org

Did you know that fees at *childpsych* differ according to the time of day you see us?

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Learning Difficulties and Children

Feature article by Philip Gosschalk MAPS, Principal & Psychologist of *childpsych*

Learning problems occur in up to 25% of school age children. This means, in a class of 30 children you can expect to find seven children who are having significant difficulty with their school work.

How do you define a learning problem?

It is easy to get confused with all the diagnostic labels being used by various professionals. For example, "dyslexia" is still commonly used, as is "learning disorder", "learning difficulty", "learning disability".

It is important to make a distinction between a learning *difficulty* and a learning *disorder/disability*. When a child is assessed for learning problems, one of the most important things to do is to work out what the child's *potential* is. In other words, is the child actually capable of performing at their grade level. The best way to work out a child's learning "potential" is to give an intelligence test (described below). A child's performance on an "IQ" test gives an idea of their learning ability or potential. For example, if a child is 10-years old, and is three years behind in their learning but an IQ test indicates an intellectual disability then we wouldn't expect this child to be able to learn at the same rate as other 10-year old children. This would be unrealistic. We would instead say the child with an intellectual disability also has "learning difficul-

ties".

So, if a child's academic grades are not in keeping with what we expect his/her potential to be, we would call this a "learning *disorder/disability*". There are also specific labels for



A cognitive assessment provides a wealth of information

the type of *learning disorder/disability* a child has. Some of these you would have heard of: dyslexia, mathematics disorder and so on.

What are the causes of learning problems?

Learning problems can be caused by genetic and/or a range of difficulties during the pregnancy, during the birth or during infancy. For example, a child who is born significantly prematurely has an increased risk of learning difficulties.

Also, children who change education systems, have gone through an emotionally upsetting time or who do not respond to a particular style of teaching may also fall behind academically.

How should a child's learning problems be assessed?

The most important examination a child can undergo is a cognitive assessment. An "IQ" test is usually used. A cognitive assessment provides a wealth of

information. It gives an idea of the child's learning potential, what cognitive areas are having difficulty (such as short term memory), what the child's cognitive strengths are and so on.

Once a cognitive test is conducted, then referral to other specialists can be arranged if necessary. For example, if the assessor (usually a psychologist) feels a significant auditory problem is present then a referral to an audiologist may be made.

The assessment conducted by *childpsych* usually includes an evaluation of motor skills, how well the child can sense things with their hands (important in handwriting), memory functioning, language functioning, visual processing and so on. At *childpsych* we also check for any behavioural and attention problems as well as emotional difficulties. We do this by liaising with the school and interviewing the parents in depth. If you're interested see our "NeuroEducational EvaluationTM" brochure on our website.

We usually recommend a general paediatric examination to be thorough. This professional will take a medical perspective of the child's learning difficulties. They may decide to order a test of thyroid functioning etc.

What can be done about the child's learning problems?

A lot! Depending on the cognitive reasons for the child's learning difficulties, a

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CHILDPSYCH:PSYCHOLOGY PRACTICE

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“ My experience of private speech-language therapy services supported by a home program is positive.”


PSYCHOLOGY PRACTICE
helping families and
children to move forward

Learning Difficulties & Children *con't*

speech pathologist, occupational therapist and psychologist may be able to help. Schools have remedial teachers who are experts in taking the information provided by speech pathologists, psychologists and so on and turning this into an individually tailored education program. Tuition agencies can also be valuable in providing intensive remedial help. At *childpsych*, because we are trained in education also, we provide educational recommendations.

How long does it take to sort out a learning problem?

Every child is different. Usually it takes months and even years for a child to begin to catch up to their classmates. Some children may always have a learning difficulty. An assessment by a psychologist, trained in education, can give you an idea of what to expect.

What can parents do to help?

Parents can help by giving their children a love of learning. For example, if the child is interested in dinosaurs then go to a movie on dinosaurs, get out some books and make a dinosaur model! It is important that children with learning difficulties have another identity. Make sure they are involved in something outside of school that they are good at (eg. sport).

With young children, read to them daily. For older children, buy them material they like to read such as suitable comics and magazines.

Children Eating Dirt by Philip Gosschalk MAPS, Principal Psychologist

Why do children eat dirt? Well first of all, anyone who has raised children or been around toddlers will understand that this is a favourite past time of children.



However, children who have a craving to eat dirt and other non-food substances are often diagnosed with a

My Child Doesn't Need Speech Therapy. They can talk!

By Julie Mountford, Speech Pathologist

Speech Pathology and Speech Therapy are the same thing and the name can be very confusing indeed. Speech Pathologists work with communication skills in people of all ages. In school age children, they focus on the areas of understanding language, speaking, written expression and overall reading and spelling skills. Children who are not achieving as they should within the classroom may have an underlying language disorder. In some cases, this can be undetected as the child can converse or chat satisfactorily. However, difficulties with language skills can affect a child's learning ability.

Most teaching is conducted in the auditory-verbal mode (speaking, listening, talking) with visual support, which is generally information on the blackboard. If your child has a receptive language disorder or an auditory processing disorder, they will not be able to listen effectively, block out background noise, process information taught for meaning, recall or remember what the teacher has taught. They can also have difficulties with "sounding out" words and understanding what they have read.

If your child has an expressive language disorder, he or she will experience difficulty with speaking in sentences, using correct grammar, expressing what their intent,

telling stories, and relating events. Problems in expressive language can affect the *quality* of the child's written stories and so on. Such children will write less than their classmates and take longer to come up with "ideas". Parents and teachers often get frustrated when the child takes 15 minutes to write a sentence!

My experience of private speech-language therapy services supported by a home-based program is positive. Parents are an integral part of treatment and are taught to become 'the therapist at home'. Many therapy tasks can be downloaded from the Internet via my subscription to a Speech Pathology resource.



Children who are not achieving.....may have a language disorder

As many children enjoy computers, they can do therapy tasks without finding it a burden. Therapy at home does not require much time for the enormous impact it can have upon children's learning abilities.

Julie is a Speech Pathologist in private practice. She can be contacted on 0412 617 577

condition called "pica". Pica means "magpie". A bird well known for its large and indiscriminate appetite. Pica is commonly diagnosed in 25-30% of children aged 2-3. It is seen in children with disorders such as Autism and can be seen in pregnant women and people with epilepsy also.

Behavioural treatments have received considerable support. Behavioural treatments involve the use of tech-

niques such as reinforcement, environmental manipulation and impulse control. These are similar techniques to giving up smoking or other habits.

Medical interventions are also necessary. Medical interventions have included addressing an iron deficiency (which is thought to be one cause) as well treating the results of pica such as bowel complications like lead poisoning and parasitic infections.