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# Learning Connections

BUILDING FOUNDATIONS FOR LEARNING

*For the child who struggles in school...*

## When to Refer for Assessment

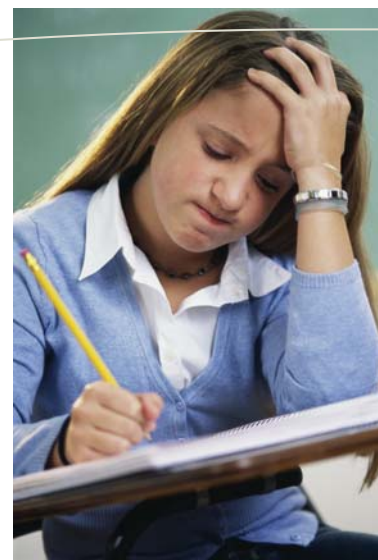
**Deciding to have a child assessed is a big step.**

When parents wonder why their very bright child struggles in school, you can help them explore the problem and move forward with a plan. A referral for an assessment with a qualified specialist will answer some of these questions in just a few hours:

- Why does a child have trouble maintaining focus?
- Why does a child seem disorganized and forgetful?
- Why does a child do well on spelling tests but makes spelling errors when writing?
- Why doesn't a child enjoy reading?
- Why is reading comprehension weak?

- Why does a child struggle with completing his school-work and homework?
- Why can't a child write legibly and easily?
- Why does a child struggle with written language?
- Why is it so difficult for a child to remember math facts and procedures?
- How can a child feel more self-confident in school?

If you take the "wait and see" approach and advise parents that "children develop at their own rate" you may be correct. However, while that child's cognitive abilities may be slowly simmering, the neurons of his peers are firing and connecting at a dizzying pace.



For average to bright children who struggle in school, it is more likely that **the cause of their problems is weak or inefficient processing skills**. With early intervention that is linked to diagnostic testing, processing skills can be strengthened to support strong academic learning.

*Jill Greenberg M.Ed., Director of the Malibu Learning Center in California*



## Banyan Tree Learning Center

opened in San Diego in 1993 to provide assistance to students who struggle in school. Director, Nanci Engle, an Educational Therapist and Learning Disability Specialist, believes ALL children can achieve to their potential. Banyan Tree helps student who have difficulty with reading, dyslexia, attention, memory, executive functioning, language, social skills, and other learning disabilities. The monthly **Struggling Student Series** is for parents and professionals to learn about current trends and research in learning disabilities. The **BTLC Parent Support Group** meets monthly for parents to discuss problems and solutions. Call **619-226-6171** or **858-578-6616** for help or to find out about coming events.

## 7 Things Every Professional Should Know About Learning Challenges



1. **Attention problems are often a symptom, not the real issue ...** In her book, *Why Our Children Can't Read*, Dr. Diane McGuinness writes, "The worse you are at something, the more brain cells you need to do it, the harder it is to keep doing it, and the harder it is to keep your attention focused on what you're doing." When it takes more effort to do something, the brain burns more glucose, using energy, which can eventually lead to exhaustion. In order for the brain to efficiently process information, it has to regulate levels of attention. The **two major attention control systems** in the brain involve:

- attending for a certain amount of time
- being able to keep out distractions from the surrounding environment

Learning things that are difficult makes holding attention to that task a struggle. When learning is difficult, the ability to block out distracting background or peripheral noises is stressed or decreased.

When new things are learned, or concepts are still a novelty, more energy is required from the brain to pay attention. Over time, with an efficient processing system, this effort to pay attention diminishes as tasks become more innate and automatic. However, **if a student's processing system is not working efficiently, it may take longer for skills to get to that comfortable, automatic level, increasing the likelihood of attention challenges .**

2. **"Trying harder" may not produce results...** Believe it or not, trying too hard can be counter-productive. In order to be an efficient learner of anything, we need to be able to use all of our mental resources. Our two hemispheres in the brain each have unique thinking capabilities which compliment each other and work best in cooperation. The right side of our brain lets us experience the whole or the "big picture." It is more intuitive and less structured. The left side is logical, orderly, and verbal. It allows us to break information into small bits in order to learn new things and communicate. When both brain hemispheres work together, learning can be easier and more fun. Telling a struggling learner to "try harder" may actually cause him/her to "over focus" with the left side of the brain. S/he will try and try to make sense of the pieces, but without the "big picture" support of the right brain, s/he **will become more confused and frustrated.**

3. **Respect the effort...** Recognize that being smart, but having to work harder and longer than anyone else in your class, or trying hard and failing anyway, is **painful**. It effects both the individuals with the learning challenges and their families.

4. **Coping is NOT the final answer...** All of us have both stronger and weaker areas of ability, talent, and interest. WE naturally gravitate toward our strengths, and often find ways to get around the weaker areas. As an adult, if you are terrible at playing tennis, you may choose to cope with that by not playing tennis. But what if that weak area is reading? "Getting around" it or just coping with a reading disorder is not easy or comfortable in today's society. Those of us who work with people with "learning disabilities," do them a *great disservice* if we do not seek to understand and address the underlying skills and differences in processing that cause the learning challenges. **Teaching compensations and coping strategies is simply not enough.**

5. **Look at the whole child...** If the child is not performing to his potential academically, ask these questions:

- Does the child enjoy learning?
- Is the child eating a variety of healthy foods?
- Is the child getting enough sleep and maintaining good sleep patterns?
- Does the child independently complete homework and follow through on responsibilities?
- Is it easy for the child to communicate what s/he needs and wants?
- Does the child have self-confidence and experience social acceptance?

**If the answer was "no" to any of these questions, take a look at what piece of the learning puzzle is affected through a professional assessment.** If it is a matter of changing dietary habits or improving sleeping patterns, these are things that can be worked out in the home.

However, if communicating is difficult for the child, or if s/he has low self-confidence, low social acceptance, difficulties with focusing or organizational skills, or struggles to independently complete work, there could be underlying factors that need to be addressed.

6. **Underlying processing skills MUST be addressed for *lasting* changes...** The most common cause of learning challenges is inefficient mental tools, or processing skills. In order to learn, individuals must be able to:

- **Pay attention**
- **Remember**
- **Quickly and accurately process what they see and hear**

When **any** underlying processing skills are weak, the individual will be a less efficient learner. *Only by addressing underlying issues can the individual become a truly independent learner.*

7. **The brain can change...** Recent brain research tells us that the brain has **plasticity**, or the ability to change with training. Through intensive training that "stretches" an individual's thinking, chemical and physical changes can occur in the brain. Because we know this kind of "neuro-rehabilitation" is possible, we also know that with the right tools and strategies, new, more efficient neuropathways can be developed to enhance a student's overall learning and performance.

*Jill Stowell, M.S., Director, Stowell Learning Center*

*"My pediatrician wasn't sure whether I should take my child for an evaluation or wait for six months to see if she would catch up. He recommended that we didn't wait, and I am so happy. My child isn't caught up yet, but is doing so much better in school. Thanks for your help in explaining strengths and weaknesses and providing solutions."*





## Ask About BTLC's Struggling Student Series

## Information for Professionals to Share with Parents:

### ***Tax Benefits for Students with Disabilities***

If you have a child with a learning disability, you may qualify for valuable tax benefits. If your child has AD/HD, or another "physical, mental, or emotional impairment," **you may also qualify for tax benefits.** Because tax laws are complex, and many tax preparers often do not have occasion to use these unique tax benefits, families are at risk of not receiving refunds worth many

thousands of dollars. Fifteen to thirty percent of families with a "disabled" child may have one or more federal or state tax benefits they have not taken advantage of yet.

Tax decisions should not be made simply on the basis of the information provided here.

**Print out this guide from Schwab Learning for your tax advisor.**

<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.aspx?>

## LEARNING CONNECTIONS Education for Professionals



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