

thinking children

A NEWSLETTER OF THE **Learning Resource Network**



A Different Kind of Resource for Parents

Allow Us to Introduce Ourselves...

Several years ago during the "information revolution" of the late '90s a group of psychologists, educators, and child development specialists at the JBFCS realized that contemporary parents needed a new kind of professional support. Parents were no longer struggling due to a lack of knowledge about child development. They were struggling instead with a glut of information. Print and electronic media, particularly the internet, were filling their lives with more research conclusions, new theories, and advice than anyone could reasonably sort through and make sense of. The Learning Resource Network was created to help parents sort through this maze of information.

Not just another source of more theories and recommendations, LRN is a tool to help parents think through all that they are now confronted by. For example, do children who are being described as "slightly aggressive" in nursery school need an immediate behavioral evaluation, or are they merely exhibiting behaviors that are consistent with the adjustment to a new social environment?

Or, in the welter of current explanations about learning difficulties, what are the solid truths? Do children with learning disabilities really learn differently from others? Indeed, is there one "normal" way to learn and are all differences necessarily disabilities? Or to take another example, is the spectrum of disorders that includes Asperger's syndrome, autism, and pervasive developmental disability really on the increase? And what is this spectrum anyway? And what do we mean by "spectrum"?

Questions such as these are what we think about at LRN. And it will be questions such as these that will be addressed in each issue of *Thinking Children*. Timely questions about how we now think about child development will be addressed in a direct and straightforward style to help parents think more simply and clearly about this increasingly complex field.

It is difficult to remain a calm and confident parent, when you feel that what you don't know is constantly increasing and threatening to overwhelm what you do know. In this way, LRN and the *Newsletter* are devoted to lowering parental anxiety.

Learning Resource Network is excited by the introduction of the first issue of our newsletter. Within this, and each subsequent issue, you will find articles, facts, and opinions pertaining to topics of learning and child development. Our hope is that you become stimulated and intrigued by what we have to say, and help to expand our network by sending us your questions and comments.



For over 100 years, the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, Inc. has been at the forefront of providing help and support to New Yorkers in need through a wide range of child and family programs. The Learning Resource Network is one such program, offering consultation and support services to assist parents concerned with child development and learning issues.

If you have any questions or concerns about your child, please feel free to contact us:

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Phases and Fads in the Field of Child Development

BY DAVID LICHTENSTEIN, PH.D.

Like many fields, the field of child development goes through its fads and phases. A couple of generations ago, when psychoanalysis was the leading approach to the field, the whole range of childhood problems including learning difficulties were attributed to conflicts of love in the family. Then a paradigm shift occurred, first, when “cognitive” (intellectual) development came to be viewed as an independent or autonomous domain in the developing child, and, second, when the neurological or brain-related aspects of that autonomous domain started to be understood.

A whole new approach to learning problems emerged based on a neuropsychological model. No longer were delays in an otherwise bright child’s reading to be viewed as a symptom of unconscious conflict or an unresolved complex, but instead were a result of a specific neuropsychological lag in development. Instead of *inhibitions* based upon unconscious fears of the paternal figure, we had *disabilities* based upon inadequate visual-sequential memory, poor cross modal (i.e. sound-symbol) associations, or weaknesses in auditory discrimination.

The great benefit of shifts like this is that they open up ways of thinking. They encourage discoveries that add to our base of knowledge. However, there is often a cost associated with this benefit. That cost is the loss of what was true in the old paradigm. We do know more now about the neurological underpinnings of thinking and learning. The paradigm shift toward neuropsychology has informed us about the ways the brain processes information and thus how the developing child confronts the challenges of learning. However, there were truths in the old view that the intimate relationships of early childhood and the emotional character of early development play a powerful role in shaping the way a child experiences the world, and hence how that child will engage in the challenges of learning. Those truths have been eclipsed by the new discoveries.

In appreciating the importance of brain functions, we have lost sight of the fact that the brain only functions as part of a whole organism, in this case the developing human organism that is a child. And while there might be a certain amount of relative autonomy to these brain functions, there is also an interaction between them and the rest of the child’s life including emotions, fears, fantasies and the relationships with others that shape these human dimensions. Indeed some of the most exciting recent work in neuropsychology is concerned with the neuropsychology of emotions and the (re-)discovery that thinking also involves processes in the brain that are associated with feelings, fears, and other non-rational dimensions. Once again, the great computer in our heads is showing itself to be more impressive than the high-speed machines on our desks.

In addition to solving logical problems, the brain is also constantly monitoring and reacting to the emotionally charged realities of interpersonal life. It doesn’t treat these domains of thought and emotion as though they are divided by an unbridgeable gap.

Thought can be exciting and sometimes frighteningly so. Making new discoveries in the realm of the intellect triggers all kinds of reactions in the realm of emotions, some of which are pleasant and some rather intimidating. As this is true of thinking in general it is especially true when it comes to children learning. They are particularly responsive and sensitive beings for whom learning is the central experience of their lives.

The great challenge that we now face is how to combine perspectives that seem at odds with one another. We must respect the discoveries made regarding the neuropsychology of learning processes while also recognizing that the child’s emotional, interpersonal, and yes, unconscious, life are still fundamental elements influencing those processes. It is an intimidating and exciting challenge to combine perspectives that have historically been seen as opposites.

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Standardizing The Curriculum...And Our Children

BY DANIEL M. TARPLIN, M.A.

This past April, as I was vacationing in Washington State, I had the opportunity to visit a public elementary school in a rural area near the Puget Sound, on the outskirts of a Native American Indian reservation. The reservation, like most others in the United States, was plagued with rates of unemployment, alcoholism, single-parent families, and illiteracy that equal those found in the poorest urban areas in the country.

The school, which I was later told had a minority student population of about 25-30% (the only minority group being the Native American children) was a large bright building with more resources — from computers to teacher aides — than the best public schools of New York City. It was a pleasant shock to me to see a school, in a depressed rural area, with so many resources. Being a former first-grade teacher in a Bronx public school, the school appeared to be an ideal place to teach.

As my tour of the school continued, I was allowed to sit in on a writing lesson in a kindergarten class. I walked into

the spacious room and saw what looked like a vibrant learning environment, with children sitting around tables throughout the room. As I quietly made my way to a small wooden chair, not wanting to disturb the lesson, I became disturbed by what I saw. Every child (about 22 or 23 in total) had a workbook opened to the same page, with a pencil in hand, waiting for... something. The next moment I heard a man's voice giving instructions on the days phonics activity. It involved circling letters on a page that corresponded to the first sound of each word that he spoke. I looked over to where the voice was coming from and saw the head teacher walking away from a tape recorder where she had apparently just hit the PLAY button. I could not believe, in a school that was obviously dedicated to providing the best possible resources to a diverse population, as well as teachers who seemed seasoned *and* happy — a combination not often found in public schools — trying to engage the 23 five- and six-year olds of very different cultural backgrounds with an audio-taped phonics lesson.

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Celebrating Adolescence

BY ANIA SIWEK, PSY.D.

Adolescence is a time when a child shifts from the world of make-believe to that of reality: from playing with dolls to wearing high heels, from imagining oneself a star centerfielder to trying out for the junior varsity, from romantic fantasies to sexual experimentation. What had been playful flight of imagination is now becoming more of a reality. No one of us is really ready for this change, either as parents or as children. Our discomfort with these changes often brings upheaval, disorientation, and frustration. We do the best we can, inevitably keeping one foot in our child's world of make-believe and fantasy and our other foot tentatively stepping into their new world of real life.

Adolescents no longer rely on their families to make sense of their world. Instead, a new sense of invulnerability pushes them to begin to look to themselves and their peers to understand who they are and the role

they play in the world around them. The challenge is to accept this change as inevitable and indeed desirable without either rushing it or resisting it. It helps to recognize that adolescents often waver back and forth through this stage of development. The child who steps into the real world one day will step back into the fantasy world the next: one day eighteen and the next day eight. Parents also swing between seeing the child as a little grown-up and as "my baby".

The adolescent who seems to be shutting you out may still be wondering: *Will Mom and Dad be available to take care of me when I need them most?* What may seem like confusion is in fact a process of accommodating to the new while holding on to the old. It is the wise parent who can find this meaning in what may seem to be only chaos and disorder.



Standardizing The Curriculum...And Our Children

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As the voice continued I saw children confused and frustrated, looking next to them and over their shoulders to the obvious few who knew the answers. The learning that was taking place was inappropriate for a large portion of the class. Though each child had such varying degrees of ability, they all were expected to do and understand and know the same material as every other child in the class.

I left the school with thoughts of New York City. At first glance, there are few, if any, tangible similarities between the small-town environment of an Indian-reservation in the Pacific Northwest, and New York City. With a more critical eye focused on the schools, however, there are some similarities to be found: both have students who come from high-risk social and economic environments, both have high-percentages of minority populations, and both have teachers who seemed to be dedicated to their profession, and more importantly to the successful development of their students. And now, with the implementation of the new reading, writing, and math curricula in New York City, there is yet another similarity: a standardized curriculum.

What is now cause for some concern is the new NYC reading, writing and math curricula that have been implemented in New York City elementary schools this year. Many schools that have been built around a philosophy that promoted individualized learning styles are now being forced by the city to change their ways of thinking about curriculum and teaching to comply with a unified standard of practice. Every teacher in New York City, except those teaching in the highest performing schools, are now using a unified curriculum.

To be fair, there seems to be an intent to allow for some flexibility within the new standardized curricula. Teachers can use some creativity in planning and implementing their lessons. If, however, teachers become so dependant on mandated curricula, standardization will have deleterious effects on the empowering possibilities of learning.

As the school year continues and the new curricula passes through their initial stages, my hope is that teacher's will be given the training and flexibility necessary to provide an education that, while anchored by standardization, will be supplemented by creative learning appropriate for every child. If standardization becomes the end in-and-of itself, rather than the means to a broader end, there is a danger that including "then press PLAY" in the teacher's manual will become the next step towards stricter levels of standardization. The result will be many students turning their heads and nudging their neighbors in an attempt to "learn" the right answer. 

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