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thinking children

A NEWSLETTER OF THE **Learning Resource Network**



Differences in Development: Do You Need to Worry?

When our children sail through a year at school, it's easy to smile and to be relaxed. What happens, though, when the inevitable blips of development occur and you get a call from school saying that they are worried about your child?

We know that all children develop differently and that all children have different strengths and weaknesses. We as parents enjoy these differences and encourage them. One child teaches himself to read by watching *Sesame Street* but can't hold a pencil, another can hardly recognize the letters but is so comfortable with her physical coordination and another gets such pleasure as he tells a story, complete with every detail. We do art projects with one child, math games with another, memory games with another. We celebrate what comes easy to them and we understand that not everything does. We also know that, for most children, development is a process that is very variable and that different skills will develop at different speeds for different children. And that, indeed, variability is *the* normal part of development.

Individual differences in development have implications for a child's functioning in school as well. Some children learn to read before they even enter school, others don't get it until they're in second — or maybe even third — grade. Some children are born with the ability to sit still while the teacher talks while, for others, it may take another year or two of growing up. Some children are ready to "work" in kindergarten and first grades; some children still need time to play. These differences in style will mean that all children are not learning academic skills at the same time — or in the same way.

Though there are many families and many schools who remain relaxed in relation to a child's style and the possibility of needing more time, the trend is to view these individual differences — even if they refer to one weak area in an otherwise well-developing child — in more alarming ways. References to diagnoses of dyslexia or ADD, recommendations for intervention, concerns about whether the child will be able to catch up are occurring with such great frequency that parents begin to worry even before they understand what they should be worrying about — or, indeed, if there is anything to really worry about. Too often, we hear parents relating conversations about some particular issue that has arisen in school — or on the playground — or about a mild delay in some area of development as *if* the assumption is that it is a serious problem. And, all too often, parents report the recommendation for a plan of professional intervention at an *initial* conference about issues such as these.

We need to take concerns seriously, we want to do what is best for our children and we care about giving our children every opportunity for success. What troubles us,

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:

Phone: (212) 632-4499

Fax: (212) 584-8484

Email: LRN@JBFC.S.ORG

Differences in Development

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however, is that in our rush to make things better, we may not only be overreacting, but we may also be unintentionally communicating something to our child — that this is a serious problem, that we're worried and that there is an urgency to make it 'better' which he can't do himself. How to evaluate when we should offer a child professional help and when we should figure out ways of helping him to help himself is probably one of the more common — and difficult — dilemmas facing parents today. (This principle of Optimal Struggle is discussed in the editorial on page 3.)

We know that similar issues and problems mean very different things for different children; therefore, understanding your child's story and the developmental meaning of the issue in question is the important next step. In and of itself, a delay in reading, difficulty in attention, some awkwardness in motor coordination and/or shyness in relation to other children should raise questions for further thought, not signal a serious difficulty. Somewhere between assuming that there is nothing to worry about and fearing the worst is the place where parents think best about their children.

What do we have to contribute as parents? We know how our children learn in our families. We know what kinds of tasks are easy and what are difficult, what particular styles they use for learning in different kinds of settings and what challenges are overwhelming. We know what works to get them back on task, how resilient — or how stubborn — they are and what happens to them when they get frustrated. Do they need extra time? A demonstration? A verbal explanation? A visual explanation? Something hands-on?

With or without professional intervention, parents are the most important resource that their children have. In today's rush for professional intervention, there is the sense that, if you consult a professional, all will be solved. Figuring out if and when such a consultation makes sense is the challenge that parents face. Obviously, each child and family has a different story — and will therefore need different next steps. It is a fundamental principle of LRN that parents are the glue for all interventions. From the relationship with teachers to the relationship with other professionals who work with your child, parents need to have collaborative and mutually respectful relationships. We as parents, more than anybody else, influence our children's development and therefore need to be educated about our children's needs. We then need to educate others about our experience and perspective about our children.

As with most things, we find that raising questions, collecting further observations and collaborating with others is the best way of figuring out the best way to address the issue. Using the knowledge and experience that we have as parents allows us to become more informed and, therefore, better equipped to make the necessary decisions.

As we begin to think about the present concerns, we should consider questions such as the following:

- ▶ Is this concern new? If so, when did it start? What do we know about the history?
- ▶ What have we observed about our child that might help us understand why this is happening now?
- ▶ If this is a recurring concern, what has helped in the past? Have there been attempts that have not been successful?
- ▶ Who do we trust to know our child well and to be able to help us think about this particular issue?
- ▶ We need to know how our observations compare with others' observations. Are they similar to what is seen in school? Do our experiences help explain something that hadn't been understood before? And vice versa?

Often, this step of further observation is extremely helpful. The collaboration among the child, parent and teacher offers new ideas and new strategies and it is not at all unusual for everybody to see bursts of development during this process.

If, however, the conversations you are having with your child's teacher remind you of earlier conversations that you had with his/her previous teachers and/or if your own observations of your child's behavior indicate that certain concerns remain unchanged, it is probably time to consider a professional consultation. This would help identify the causes of these difficulties and the best way to proceed.

If all agree that further intervention is necessary, the next conversation will help figure out what that should be. This next step is an extension of the collaborative process already started. You will probably have many conversations with many people. Some will have a style that is similar to yours, some probably will not. The most important thing is that there is mutual respect — for questions, for disagreements, for the information that each of you can contribute. Keeping an open mind about your child's difficulties and finding people whom you trust allows constructive collaboration to take place. And that is the best gift that we can give our children.



Optimal Struggle

There was a time not long ago when educators would fault pediatricians for their supposedly laissez faire attitude toward children's developmental problems. "It's just a stage. I'm sure he/she will grow out of it..." was the stereotypic refrain. It was a time when the benefits of early intervention were first being appreciated, when the idea of catching developmental problems at the youngest possible age to facilitate effective interventions was new and needed to be promoted.

Now, when referrals to specialists are far more likely, when psychological testing and evaluations are far more routine, and early intervention more the norm than the exception, it is possible to raise the opposite concern: are there ever times when non-intervention is the best course of action? Can we go too far in the direction of early identification and treatment to the extent that children are denied the opportunity to work through their own developmental processes without exceptional supports? It is a difficult question. Of course, no child should be refused the educational and psychological services that he or she needs. However, assessing that need is not always as simple and straightforward as it might first appear.

Can too much intervention ever be a real danger? Why not consider all additional support as always in the child's best interest? After all, why should a child struggle on her own when she can get professional help? The answer to these questions lies in a principle that we might call "Optimal Struggle." It is a view that suggests that there is a *zone of difficulty* in learning and development that is best for the child. Struggle that is beyond this zone is not good, but neither is an absence of struggle nor interventions that reduce the level of difficulty so far that it is below that zone of Optimal Struggle. Professional intervention is generally beneficial, and may actually facilitate optimal struggle, but there can be too much of a good thing, or a tendency to turn too quickly for help when a bit of thinking and working it out is in order.

This is really an old idea that tends to get forgotten. Teachers and psychologists, to say nothing of parents and grandparents, have long appreciated the

virtue of work, struggle, and the development of perseverance and resilience. However, we feel it is time to speak about it once again and to give it the kind of central focus and attention it deserves. By giving it a name, we mean to put Optimal Struggle back on the agenda in discussions about special needs and interventions.

There are numerous examples of this idea. Let's say, a child is struggling with the principles and practice of long division. Stymied and frustrated, the child is ready to give up. Is it time for a math tutor, or time to say, "keep at it, you'll get it in time"? The fact is that without knowing the child's history it is impossible to say. But it is important to recognize that it might be just as risky to jump to the conclusion that professional assistance is needed, as it is to ignore that option. The rule of thumb would require some thought about the zone of Optimal Struggle and an assessment of this child's position in that regard. Applying the principle of Optimal Struggle requires careful and thorough thinking instead of routine decisions and automatic choices.

Even an example such as the following would benefit from an appreciation of this principle: A three year-old's speech is occasionally unclear but she seems otherwise happy and manages to communicate her wishes effectively. Is it necessarily time to start speech therapy or might it be better to wait and see if she can work it out on her own? Here the question of age plays a part in the application of the idea of Optimal Struggle. Many children struggle a bit in developing their articulation skills. If they are still struggling at age five, however, it means something different than struggling with the same problem at age three. Furthermore, not all struggles are equal. Some might warrant professional help, some not. The concept of Optimal Struggle must be applied in both an age-appropriate and problem specific manner. Even an intervention as generally beneficial as speech therapy might not be in the best interest of all children at all times.

SAT prep courses have become the norm for many high school juniors. However, not long ago, they

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Optimal Struggle

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were considered to be special services, designed for those who either needed or wanted additional help. This example raises two issues. First, in making “special services” the norm, we may be denying some children the valuable experience of struggling with test prep on their own. Second, when prep courses become the normal practice in the culture, then the level of expected struggle changes for the individual. It becomes an excessive and non-optimal struggle for a child to try and prepare on his or her own, and may put the child at a disadvantage, in the short run, relative to his or her peers. In other words, whatever we might think in some absolute sense, we cannot accurately evaluate the level of Optimal Struggle in a cultural void but only in the context of cultural norms.

The principle of Optimal Struggle is one that parents should integrate in their advocacy for their children. They should seek the balance where an appreciation of both sides of the question is maintained: the value of treatment *and* the benefits of non-intervention. Only then can the kind of thorough thinking take place where a decision is made for the particular child, in light of her unique and individual needs, and in the context of her particular cultural world. The concept of Optimal Struggle is that there is a balance to be sought

between assistance and autonomy, that neither extreme is in the best interest of the child, and that there is something to be gained by working things out for oneself, when it can be done, just as there is a value in getting help when it is needed.



We Need Your Questions!

In order to introduce a new feature, *Ask LRN*, we invite you to submit your questions. Any question, specific or general, about any age child, on topics related to learning and child development are welcomed.

In the event that we are not be able to publish your question due to volume, we would be happy to speak with you personally. If you would like us to contact you via telephone or email, please include the appropriate contact information with your question.

If possible, please e-mail the questions to LRN@jbfcs.org or call us at 212-632-4499.

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CHILDREN:

To Worry or Not to Worry, That Is The Question

Come join us for an informal small group discussion about children, learning and intervention.

- Is there such a thing as too much intervention?
- Can harm be done if you don't get him support immediately?
- When should you really begin to worry?

Please choose either the morning or evening session.

Attendance is limited to 20.

Please RSVP early.

Both groups will be led by Marsha Winokur, Ph.D., Director, Learning Resource Network and The Learning Centers

Evening: Wednesday, November 17 — 6:30pm–8:00pm

Morning: Wednesday, December 1 — 8:30am–10am

Call LRN at 212-632-4499 to register.

When You're Worried: A Guide to Thinking About Your Child

My 5 year old daughter's teacher called me to say that she was behind her class in reading. Will she always be behind? What should I do?"

"My seven year old has always been very clingy but I never thought it was a problem. But now she's in second grade and when she is invited to birthday parties, she refuses to go unless I will stay with her. All of the other children say good-bye to their mothers easily while my daughter clings to me and becomes hysterical when I tell her I need to leave. Is this a problem? What should I do?"

"My 10 year old son is having difficulty focusing in class. The teacher has told me that he has an attention disorder and that he should be on medication. I'm a bit worried about medicating a child. Is there anything else I can do?"

Loving parents worry about their children. We believe that a certain amount of parental worry is good for children. Worrying at its best is part of our being protective of our children and being attentive to their developmental needs. At its worst, worrying becomes preoccupying and provokes anxiety in a way that interferes with our ability to understand what our child needs.

Thinking Children is a newsletter dedicated to "thinking parents." In each article we stress that parents' knowledge, perspective and involvement are fundamental to helping their children thrive. And, just as we are creating the phrase *optimal struggle* as being essential to children's development, we also believe that there is a form of this principle for parents. It is important for us to calibrate our "worry" and, consequently, our ability to address our children's difficulties when they occur. It is important for us to raise the questions that are important, to know when there is an issue that requires our attention, and to become more knowledgeable about the issues that affect our children.

The questions that begin this article are all from parents who are "worried" and who are struggling to figure out the "next step." These questions are about different children — of different ages — in different families. We have, however, chosen to present them here in order to illustrate some general principles.

Educate yourself.

Just as you would consult a baby book about information about crawling and walking, you should find the excellent resources on the developmental issues that concern you. Become educated about the different components of learning to read. Become educated about the enormous variability of separation issues in childhood. Become educated about the many different reasons why children have difficulty focusing.

Use this knowledge to think about the questions that need to be addressed. Raising questions helps us understand what is going on.

If your daughter's reading is of concern, consider the following questions:

- Does your daughter recognize the letters of the alphabet?
- Can she retell or re-enact a short story?
- Does she enjoy reading with you?
- Is she able to remember something that you and she have read together?

If you are concerned about your child's clinginess, some of the following questions might be helpful:

- In what situations is she comfortable being without you?
- Is she able to go to school? To after-school activities?
- What seems to make her stressed? What helps to comfort her?
- Is she the kind of child who is overwhelmed by too much noise or unstructured activity?

A child's difficulty in focusing can be rooted in many different issues. The following questions may suggest some hypotheses to you:

- Is this his "normal" style? In what situations is he more focused and less restless?
- Is there something about school/learning that is difficult for him?
- Could this be his way of letting you know that he is feeling uncomfortable with certain relationships within the class? Within your family?

Be an educated relaxed observer as you spend time with your child.

All parents have their own way of spending time with their child. Use these occasions to learn more about your child and to think about the answers to the questions you have raised. Use

When You're Worried: A Guide to Thinking About Your Child

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this knowledge to help figure out the next step.

Is your daughter remembering all the stories you have read together and beginning to point out familiar letters and words? If so, you know how important your play/reading time is for her. Plan trips to the library. We wouldn't be at all surprised if reading takes on new pleasure for her.

If you have realized that your clingy daughter is more comfortable with small groups of children than with large ones, arrange for small group "parties" to help her expand her comfort level. Help her establish relationships with girls who can perhaps help her become more comfortable in larger groups. Reassure her that you are not angry at her, that you will support her choices but that you will also help her overcome her discomforts.

If you have realized that your son can be quite focused on things that are important to him, have a conversation with him about his life at school. Understand his experience that work is not always fun (and maybe even difficult) and help him set goals for himself. Talk about strategies that he can use when he gets bored (a common kid explanation for why they aren't paying attention) and be VERY proud of him when he comes home with stories that show he is making small steps toward better focus and attention.

Speak with the professionals who know your child.

Collaboration with those people who know — and work with — your child is very helpful, especially after you have some hunches about what is going on with your child. Share your observations with them and ask for their observations. Plan a "next step" to address the concern and include involving your child in an age-appropriate and supportive way. Make sure that your child knows that you both are working together to help make her feel better.

Never forget that your relationship with your child is the most important relationship.

Remember that what matters most to your child is pleasing you. Children thrive when they know that their parents are proud of them. Look for your child's strengths and acknowledge them. Similarly, if your child is struggling with something that is difficult, acknowledge it and let him know that you have confidence in him and that you will be there to help him master the problem.

Above all, have faith in yourself as a parent and know that worrying is a gift that we give our children. Worrying is constructive if we are in control of it and if we can use it as a way of becoming more educated about what our children need. For many issues, your "intervention" will be all you need. For some issues, you will need further consultation with others. Finding the balance between too much and too little worrying is one of the biggest challenges of parenting.

THINKING CHILDREN

Daniel Tarplin, M.A.,
Editor

David Lichtenstein, Ph.D.,
Contributing Editor

Teresa Conway,
Production Support

Contact Leslie Epstein Pearson, C.S.W.,
Associate Director, LRN

with questions or comments at
(212) 632-4499 or LRN@jbfcs.org

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120 West 57th Street

New York, NY 10019

Phone: (212) 632-4499

Fax: (212) 584-8484

E-mail: LRN@jbfcs.org

