



EXPERT ANSWERS

Priscilla L. Vail, M.A.T. on
Learning Styles and Emotions



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• Articles

page **1** **How Can I Detect Learning Problems?**

page **4** **What Role Do Emotions Play in Learning?**

page **7** **How Do Emotional Issues Change as Kids Grow?**

page **9** **What Standardized Do and Don't Tell Us**

page **12** **What is the Relationship Between Giftedness & Learning Issues?**

page **15** **How Can Parents Help with Homework?**

• Resources

page **17** **Books, Articles, and Websites**

Priscilla L. Vail, M.A.T. (1931-2003), a prominent national educator and speaker for 30 years, was an expert in learning disabilities, dyslexia, and giftedness. She authored nine books, eight of which are still in print, offering information and practical advice to parents and educators.

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The Expert Answers: Priscilla Vail, M.A.T.

How Can I Detect Learning Problems?

SchwabLearning.org Asks:

We know the earlier a child gets help with a learning difficulty, the better the results. What are some of the classic warning signs, or possible predictors of problems in school, parents should be aware of? Do the "labels" often assigned to children with school problems help or hurt?

Priscilla Vail, M.A.T. Answers:

In the olden days, railroad crossings had signs saying Stop! Look! Listen! Those words are still valuable today. We need to Stop and give ourselves time and space to understand what's going on around us. We need to Look for danger or caution flags to avoid colliding with onrushing trains. We also need to Listen. As children grow and venture beyond the safety of home, it is as if they are approaching a railroad crossing, and an intersection with school, community and the world. To understand warning signals, you, as a parent, need to Stop! Look! Listen!

Many academic difficulties are language based, so the first place to look for red flags is in the language system. Here are six areas:

- **The age at which a child starts to speak can indicate that child's comfort with language.** Children who understand and use words easily have figured out that the sounds people make in conversation represent different things and people in the world: "Ma-Ma," "cookie," or "baby." First, children begin to understand the language they hear, then they mimic language in return. Most adults take this for granted, but we must Stop! and appreciate what a complex task the child is performing.

“To understand warning signals, you, as a parent, need to Stop! Look! Listen!”

Some children catch on to words early. For others, language is a hard game or a difficult system. These children are sending a warning signal. If spoken language is difficult or unappealing, usually written language (reading and writing, letters and numbers) will be too.

- **Receptive language is what the child takes in, first through listening and later through listening and reading.** You as a parent need to notice whether your child's receptive language channel works effectively. Does your child enjoy listening to stories? Can your child tell you what happened in the story? Can your child remember the high points (or the details) of yesterday's story? Does your child absorb those pieces of family news they're not meant to hear: Uncle Ernie's on a binge, or why does Aunt Sophie wear **those** eyelashes at **her** age?

Children who absorb such information comfortably are demonstrating good receptive language skills. Children who are uninterested in stories, do not follow and remember a story line, or don't pick up news from conversation are flying a danger flag. They will miss news, explanations, questions, and concepts now. Later on, the process of reading may either not make sense to them or may be too difficult. At all ages, we need to Stop! Look! and Listen! to a child's receptive language.

How Can I Detect Learning Problems?

- **Expressive language is the vehicle for giving out ideas, questions, emotions, or facts.** In normal development, children practice expressively what they have taken in receptively. Parents need to Listen!
- Does your child use pronouns, plurals, and verb tenses correctly? Most children are reasonably accurate by first grade. The elementary school child who says, “Here are the thingies I branged for Tom and I” is telling us a lot.

Can your child retrieve needed words smoothly? The child who strains when trying to use such words as “marker,” “basketball,” or “peanut butter” is, in effect, saying, “Listen! I have trouble finding the words I need.”

Does your child keep sounds in correct sequence or do individual sounds or syllables slide around? Is it an “elephant” or an “ephelant”? A “hamburger” or a “hanga-burger”? A “birthday party” or a “birthparty day”? Children who tangle their sound sequences in spontaneous speech are warning us they will probably have trouble stringing sounds together when trying to read words, or breaking sounds apart when trying to spell.

Litter and clutter are warning signals. Most children can say what they mean so that others can understand them. Children who have trouble getting to the point, who litter and clutter their speech with distracting, unnecessary information, are telling us their thought processes don't go straight to the target. This difficulty will hamper their reading, classroom discussion and, above all, their writing all the way through school ... and life. They need help.

- **Some children have trouble with the mechanics of reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic.** It takes them a long time to learn their letter sounds and to recognize sight words. They may have trouble with pencil grip and handwriting. In the manner of many beginners, they may reverse their letters or numerals. Unfortunately, some children today never receive direct instruction in these early level mechanical skills. But research shows all children need this information. Those who still struggle after instruction that works for their peers need multi-sensory instruction which brings together eyes, ears, fingers, and muscles.
- **Some children have trouble organizing themselves in time and space.** They aren't sure where things belong, what to do first, and what comes last. These concepts underlie smooth function in the adult world as well as in childhood. “Nexterday” is a long time coming.

Lots of kids have trouble with the vocabulary of time and space — later, until, whenever, in a while, on time, at two o'clock. Teach these words to your child as if they were terms in a foreign language. For some children they are. Build the structure of time and space into your family life as soon as possible. Since apples don't fall far from trees, you might give yourself some help, too.

- **Some children misunderstand social cues.** They don't know how to ask to join a game or to negotiate sharing or taking turns. Children who are isolated, or who isolate themselves by their behavior, don't do well on group projects or in team sports, are seldom elected to class

“Labels are dangerous when they replace a person's humanity and individuality, but they are invaluable when they provide the precise terminology to decide who needs what, when, where, why, and how.”

How Can I Detect Learning Problems?

office, and usually sit home alone when others are at birthday parties. The sadness, anger, or frustration born of being “out” may interfere with concentration, memory, and general availability for school work, not to mention fun.

Are labels helpful or harmful? Let me tell you about my boatshed and me.

At summer’s end, our family puts the canoe, the paddles, lifejackets, Frisbees, and fishing gear, along with any unused canned goods, in the boatshed. One year, by mistake, we left the cans on the floor where they sloshed around in surging winter storm water. In June, the cans were there, intact, but their labels had soaked off. Although I could identify a can of soup, I had no idea whether it was shrimp bisque, chicken with stars, split pea, or jellied consomme. Was this can baked beans, artichoke hearts, or stewed tomatoes? Which was for kids, which would be delicious with a dollop of yogurt and a sprinkle of curry? Which needed to be piping hot, which chilled? For the food offered to match the appetite of the recipient, we needed to know what was what and who was ready for lunch.

The same is true for children and schooling. If Martha or Sam has trouble learning letter sounds, we need to prepare multisensory training. If Joe and Dawn have trouble with reading comprehension because they have weak receptive language, let’s say so, and target some specific help. If Jamil goes through math like a buzz saw, but can’t remember how to spell “friend,” let’s give him scope with numbers and help with spelling. We need to Stop! Look! and Listen! Then we need to use the information we gather to make a good plan. Labels are dangerous when they replace a person’s humanity and individuality, but they are invaluable when they provide the precise terminology to decide who needs what, when, where, why, and how. After all, what’s to be gained by giving watery broth to a student ready for hearty stew, or clam chowder to someone allergic to fish?


The Expert Answers: Priscilla Vail, M.A.T.

What Role Do Emotions Play in Learning?

SchwabLearning.org Asks:

You've written a lot about the connection between children's emotions and learning. Tell us the role emotions play in learning — both negative and positive.

Priscilla Vail, M.A.T. Answers:

A Cautionary Tale

I've been a teacher for over a quarter of a century, I've raised four kids and have six grandchildren. You'd think I'd know the alphabet by now. But hear this tale.

One evening I was sitting alone in my house in the woods. My husband was out of town at a meeting, our children were at their respective abodes, and I was reading a book. It wasn't even a murder mystery, just a story. I realized I had been hearing a knocking, thumping sound. I stopped, listened and it came again. Quite loud.

Although we live in a fairly safe area, there had been a series of recent break-ins. The noise came again. I hoped it was the steam heat and went back to my book. As I pretended to be reading, I remembered that we don't have steam heat in this house. More noises. I returned to my page, this time running my finger along the lines of print to keep my place. The noises intensified. I finally admitted to myself that the noises were coming from the basement and I had better get help.

Once I admitted to myself that I thought there were people in the basement coming my way, I went into full gear fear. I put down the book, hands trembling, mouth dry, and tiptoed to the telephone area. I got out the directory, listening to the increasingly loud sounds, and tried to find the listing for Benton Town Police. But I was so scared, I couldn't find the number. The noises got louder. Nearer too? I couldn't remember the alphabet. I couldn't make the telephone book work! So I called 911.

The squad car came quickly, strobe lights flashing, the guys jumped out, came to my door, hands on their guns, asking if I was OK. Putting my finger to my lips, I nodded that I was fine and gestured that the culprits were right down there. My saviors went to do their fearful duty and then I heard them laughing. "Wanna meet your criminals, Mrs. Vail?"

They had found a family of white tail deer, chewing off branches of my rhododendron and banging against my metal basement door. After the police left and I had stopped hyperventilating, I realized that fear had put a barrier between me and my own knowledge and information. I hadn't even been able to use the alphabet!

How Emotions Affect the Brain

As an adult, I can frame my problem in a funny story. But children in school don't have that luxury. Like me, their own knowledge often flies out of their grasp when they are scared. **Faced with frustration, despair, worry, sadness, or shame, kids lose access to their own memory, reasoning, and the capacity to make connections.**

What Role Do Emotions Play in Learning?

The mere prospect of being asked to read aloud in class is enough to freeze some kids. Having to take a written test or exam, with its combined requirements for memory, reasoning, handwriting, planning and organization, can lock some kids' gears. The sight of a math word problem knocks some kids sideways. Scared kids perform poorly, and don't learn new information well. Anxiety is the enemy of memory. And, **sadly, in many of today's classrooms, we see children whose intellectual energies and capacities are drained by negative emotional states.** Emotion is the on / off switch for learning.

Sensitive people have been observing this for years, but now objective information from neurology substantiates our hunches.

The emotional brain, the limbic system, has the power to open or close access to learning, memory, and the ability to make novel connections.

A three-way view of the human brain would show it from side to side, back to front, and bottom to top.

On one side, the left hemisphere provides logic, sequence, time, and language. On the other side, the right hemisphere houses spatial organization, certain kinds of intuition, and math.

Looking from back to front, we could see the back as a repository of knowledge and experience, but we select, use, and orchestrate that information in our frontal lobes.

The third view moves from bottom to top like an elevator. At the bottom is the brain stem (the top of the spinal column and the base of the brain) which contains the mechanism for arousal. The next level is the limbic system whose job is to interpret the emotional value of incoming stimuli, deciding whether they are neutral, good, or deadly. The limbic system broadcasts its interpretation out over the whole body, and depending on its interpretation, either opens or closes access to higher cortical function, the top stop.

If the limbic system says "Trouble" (as it did when I heard the noises), access shuts down. The elevator doesn't reach the higher level, as when I couldn't use the alphabet. Conversely, if the limbic system says "Great!", the elevator smoothly ascends to a penthouse of knowledge, imagination, and creativity. Emotion controls the elevator.

“The emotional brain, the limbic system, has the power to open or close access to learning, memory, and the ability to make novel connections.”

Reinforcing Positive Emotional Habits

Parents are the primary source of their children's emotional habits. These predict, prevent, or prepare for academic satisfaction just as they forge satisfactory or disappointing connections with the outside world. Children whose experiences have fostered optimism carry that habit with them into the school room.

Here are six principles of good practice to help parents reinforce positive emotions.

1. **Prompt motivation.**

Motivation comes from confidence which, in turn, is the harvest of competence. Break down new challenges into manageable components. From riding a bike to learning a foreign language, monitor progress, support effort, praise new competencies, and give the child a chance to showcase them.

What Role Do Emotions Play in Learning?

2. **Spark curiosity.**

Curiosity thrives on opportunities to take chances on ideas and to enjoy the messiness of questions, as well as the tidiness of answers. It dies when imagination, humor, and risk are suspect.

3. **Nourish intellect, talent, and power.**

Find what your child does well and budget time, money, and psychological energies for the good stuff. Unsupported weaknesses ache, but unexercised talents itch.

4. **Encourage connections.**

Too much schooling happens in compartments and is stored in shoeboxes. Parents can counteract this by helping kids connect experiences with words, words with pictures, pictures with music, and by weaving ideas and happenings into a web of life.

5. **Monitor growth.**

Assemble a portfolio for each child. Ask the child to keep a journal (words or pictures). Record everyone's height on the side of a door frame every Thanksgiving. On Sunday evenings, before they go to bed, ask your children to say one thing they did this week for the first time. It doesn't need to be exotic or expensive: I walked two miles, I baked a cake, I wrote a poem about the Boston Red Sox. Do the same thing yourself. Be a model.

6. **Accept special considerations.**

Parents must provide support for weaknesses, laughter for the good of the soul, organizational help, and opportunities for development of talent and reinforcement of character.

Positive emotional habits, flowing from these principles of good practice will help kids meet challenge with optimism and vigor and respond to other people with openness and joy.



The Expert Answers: Priscilla Vail, M.A.T.

How Do Emotional Issues Change as Kids Grow?

SchwabLearning.org Asks:

How do emotional issues differ at various stages of development? What should parents look for with elementary, middle, and high school students?

Priscilla Vail, M.A.T. Answers:

Although emotional hungers remain constant throughout human life, particular needs intensify at different periods. Let's look first at pre-school and elementary school, then at middle school which encompasses pre-and early adolescence, and finally at high school and beyond, the kingdoms of later adolescence and early adulthood.

Young children progress from learning to love to loving to learn. Their first teachers are, of course, their parents. When that relationship is warm, abundant and trusting, children draw from it deeply, freely, and often. They respond to parental love with new growth, they respond to parental pride with new daring, and they respond to parental trust with new faith in themselves. They also respond to parental disappointment with curdled self-concept, they respond to parental rejection with withered embrace of life, and they respond to parental loss with a subtle or overt death of the heart.

“Although emotional hungers remain constant throughout human life, particular needs intensify at different periods.”

From the lessons of daily life, each child builds an armamentarium of attitudes and assembles a wardrobe of costumes and disguises. Above all, young children fear the loss of parental love. Since they believe “I am what I can make work,” their introduction to formal learning, with its first successes or failures, dictates their feelings of worthiness or unworthiness to hold that great and irreplaceable prize, parental love.

Practically, this means parents must exercise extreme caution in starting the child's formal schooling. This decision should not be based on the timetable of the socially correct carpool but on the child's developmental readiness for the tasks presented. Once your child is in school, you as parents must be vigilant about progress or problems in early reading and writing. A tragic casualty of the recent reading wars between whole language and phonics has been that some children have never been shown the method(s) that would help them succeed. Consequently, they feel stupid, unworthy, or both, and often try to hide the extent of their difficulty from their parents, fearing banishment, or withdrawal of love and approval should the truth be known. Consider the added distress when the child has siblings for whom academic tasks are a snap.

If your child has trouble in the early levels of school, get help **immediately!** Do not wait to see if the child will grow out of it. Prevention is always easier than remediation. Learning differences don't disappear spontaneously, and talent doesn't bloom in a vacuum. If you worry that receiving extra help will make Johnny/Sue feel different, forget it. A child already feels different by virtue of what he can and cannot do. Encourage the discovery of the big message: different can be successful. The child who has learned to love deserves to love to learn.

How Do Emotional Issues Change as Kids Grow?

Middle schoolers need parents and teachers who reach to the heart, then teach to the head. The pre- or early adolescent has shed a mouthful of baby teeth, acquired big choppers, and wears enormous sneakers. In addition, many of today's middle schoolers have a large vocabulary of sexually explicit terms they fling around with noisy glee. Cumulatively, these milestones may create an incorrect impression of overall maturity and semi-adulthood. But underneath the appearance of sophistication, these kids are still young, unformed, longing for leadership, aching for behavioral guidelines and social limits, and profoundly grateful when a parent has the courage to say "No."

In school, as pediatrician Mel Levine tells us, kids in this age group are guided by one governing agenda: the avoidance of humiliation at all costs. This may mean that a student with weak handwriting or poor spelling, whose written assignments come back covered with red slash marks, may prefer not to hand in written work. The child whose contributions to classroom discussions are greeted with hoots or jeers (or quiet snickers from the power points of the class) will clam up. The kid who reads poorly may disrupt discussion of last night's reading by burping or other wind-driven activities. The kid who understands the hardest math intuitively or who remembers Juliet's speech by heart may conceal intellectual power in order to blend in with the group.

Reach to the heart, teach to the head. One thirteen year old's three favorite Christmas presents were a book of logic puzzles, a nightgown for her American Girl doll, and a blue fur telephone. In the words of the poet Anon:

I ride a yo-yo
In your presence
Thirteen's a year of
Addled essence.

In high school and beyond, kids reach for two simultaneous and contradictory goals: anonymity and fame. Beyond native intelligence, academic success requires a ready supply of basic skills, organization, the ability to juggle facts and vocabulary from many disciplines, a relatively quiet place to do homework, enough food and sleep, and some free time to ruminate on new information, concepts, and connections. In today's culture many of these are missing before the student even enters ninth grade. Parents need to be aware of these needs and supply them as fully as reality allows.

After-school jobs, athletic practices, and play rehearsals (not to mention learning arcane hobbies for the college application process) teach kids that there isn't enough time. The corollary of this is to reward them for skimming the surface of their work in order to check it off the list. The emotional price tag of skimming is the discounting of deep enjoyment and immersion. Kids who pay this price feel hurried and inadequate.

If average kids fall into these traps, what about those who struggle? Some drop out physically, emotionally, or intellectually. Others, preferring wickedness to invisibility, who hang around to see the action but won't risk competing, are particularly vulnerable to drugs and booze. Still others, fearful and lonely, craving closeness and intimacy, gravitate to sex and gangs. The English poet Stevie Smith says, "I was too far out all my life and not waving but drowning."

Parents of this age group, you need spine, humor, a clear sense of your own values, and a willingness to be temporarily unpopular. You also need to build into family time ample opportunities to enjoy your kid and let that contagion do its benevolent job.

In the words of the poet ee cummings, "I would rather learn from one bird how to sing than teach ten thousand stars how not to dance."

Hold fast to what you know and believe. Be of joyful voice.



The Expert Answers: Priscilla Vail, M.A.T.

What Standardized Tests Do and Don't Tell Us

SchwabLearning.org Asks:

Today's students are being subjected to more standardized tests, yet students with learning problems often perform poorly on these "pencil and paper" types of tests. How can parents accurately measure their child's growth and progress?

Priscilla Vail, M.A.T. Answers:

Facing root canal surgery without anesthetic, having your tax return audited, or taking standardized tests may carry equal aversion/terror. Each guarantees a loss of control while also threatening pain, frustration, or embarrassment. In two previous columns, we explored the fallout of pessimism, fear, and shame. **Here we will try to tame testing's terror by exploring what test designers are trying to discover and what aspects of student function are being measured.** Informed parents can help their children take testing more in stride, or even discover the magic kingdom of Testing Dot Calm.

What's going on? Current public pleas for school improvement have morphed into a blood thirst for higher standardized test scores. Many different types of students are hurt by this pressure. Top students are hurt because they must often trade intellectual exploration for sure-shot answers in order to remain in those highest percentiles. This barter blunts keen mental edges. Kids in the middle are hurt because, no matter how hard they try, they can't hit the bull's eye. Kids at the bottom feel swamped, overwhelmed, embarrassed, and ashamed.

However, testing is a fact of life. So let's analyze the topic and see if we can't dilute both its descriptive and predictive power.

First, we need to remind our children and ourselves that kids need to measure themselves against:

- their own individual progress
- developmental levels and charts
- academic requirements

Parents can help their children salute their own progress as they develop new skills and enjoy new achievement levels. The end of the week is a good time to have conversations about this. Each member of the family might tell something new they are trying or something they have just done for the first time. A scribe can keep notes, and each week's page can be part of a notebook or sit proudly on the refrigerator door. Here's a sample:

- Emily is learning to knit and did four rows on a scarf.
- Jimmy learned twenty new Spanish vocabulary words.
- Dad tried to make a soufflé. It was a bust, so we used it as sauce on pizza dough and he's going to try again next week. (Can we please go out for dinner instead?)

What Standardized Tests Do and Don't Tell Us

- Mom learned how to transmit a document by email.
- Granny signed up for Tai Chi.

Some people mistakenly think developmental levels only apply to little kids. Not so. Skills as varied as learning to ride a two-wheeler, sing on key, analyze grammar, or understand Shakespearean soliloquy are hard or impossible at some ages and manageable or pleasurable at others. People develop on individual timetables. While it is foolhardy to assume that time is a cure, often a little wait will do a lot of good.

One reason the topic of testing is so hot is that academic requirements are riding a ratchet in some schools but are nearly abandoned in others. Educators, as well as taxpayers, are looking for ways to assess what students are being offered and what they are retaining. We need to recognize three different types of test.

- An intelligence test is usually individually administered, its purpose is to see how smart someone is, and the results are presented in an I.Q. (Intelligence Quotient) score.
- A diagnostic test is also usually individually administered, its purpose is to see how a person learns, and the results are presented in bar graphs which show patterns and a profile.
- An achievement test is group-administered, its purpose is to see what a person has learned, and the results are presented in percentiles or stanines which show one person's achievement in comparison to other members of a grade or school. In professional lingo, these are called "time-and-power, multiple-choice, color-in-the-bubble-with-your-#2-eagle-pencil tests."

“Current public pleas for school improvement have morphed into a blood thirst for higher standardized test scores.”

Kids who score high on achievement tests are, obviously, good test-takers, a convenient skill but not necessarily evidence of deep or creative thinking. Kids who score in the mid-range usually wish they scored higher and may be confused from feeling smart most of the time but only placing as average at test time. Kids who bomb may say they don't care. This is hardly ever true.

Here are 3 Principles of Good Practice to ease the strain of testing:

1. Keep test scores in proportion. From moguls to movie stars, the world is filled with successful people who did poorly on standardized tests.
2. Urge (require?) the local school administration to make (and publish) a cluster analysis of test contents. They can get this information from previous years' tests or from the testing company.

For example, let's say cluster analysis reveals that every year's standardized test contains 12 questions on grammar and punctuation; 4 questions on metric measurement; 5 questions on reading comprehension; 6 questions on adding, subtracting, and multiplying fractions; and 5 math word problems. Armed with this information, a parent or teacher can say to a child, "How are you on grammar and punctuation? Good? OK, no worries there. Comprehension? Need a little work? OK. Fractions? No problem? Great. Word problems? Hard? Fine, we'll practice word problems and comprehension."

Analysis reduces panic. With panic gone, and realistic pride in place, the way is clear for solid success.

What Standardized Tests Do and Don't Tell Us

3. Parents, encourage your child's teacher and administrators to vary the types of tests they give. Tests that combine handwriting, memorizing, time limits, and reasoning are overwhelming to many different learners. These kids do better with hands-on projects and untimed tests with scheduled review time. This doesn't mean "dumbing down." Often teachers can ask harder questions in this kind of format, and, paradoxically, more students will do well. Portfolio assessment, exhibitions, group or individual projects, open-book tests, or take-home exams are standard fare in graduate schools and increasingly in colleges. High school teachers are learning the benefits of this enlightenment as they discover how many different kinds of students can demonstrate their knowledge and power in this kind of opportunity.

Above all, parents, students, and educators must remember that a test only shows what one person did on one exercise on one day. A standardized test score is not a license to live or a measure of deserving oxygen and space on our planet.



The Expert Answers: Priscilla Vail, M.A.T.

What's the Relationship Between Giftedness & Learning Issues?

SchwabLearning.org Asks:

We hear frequently about children who are extremely bright yet also have learning difficulties. Can you explain how talents or giftedness can be masked by learning problems? Conversely, can learning difficulties be masked by talents or giftedness?

Priscilla Vail, M.A.T. Answers:

It is honorable and generous-spirited of Charles Schwab to publicize his dyslexia. Such knowledge goes a long way to swab the decks, hosing down and mopping away misconceptions about different learning styles, intelligence, and success.

In my parlance, "making whoopi" means having fun and celebrating. Hooray for Whoopi Goldberg for letting her zest for life bubble through her self-confessed dyslexia.

"Lightening," so nicknamed by his classmates because he worked so slowly, needed extra time to finish his homework, never completed the essay questions on his exams, and his stomach must be filled with rubber from all the pencil erasers he bit off and swallowed taking math tests. Yet he won the state-wide high school poetry contest when he was only in 10th grade and went on to be published in four national magazines before graduating in the middle of his class. This articulate, athletic, intelligent boy (who chooses to remain anonymous) is both gifted and dyslexic. He is a slow, though thoughtful, reader whose laborious handwriting slows down his output in classroom tests or exams and whose rote memory is far weaker than his capacity for generating imagery.

Until recently, the idea that school problems and giftedness could conceal one another was too paradoxical for general acceptance. But that was long ago. Maybe.

Conundrum kids have irregular patterns of successes and difficulties that present a puzzle to traditional educators. Those who were understood and helped along the way may have succeeded as have Charles Schwab, Whoopi Goldberg, and "Lightening." But when talented kids who have trouble in school are only recognized for their inadequacies, they may turn against themselves, schooling, or society in general. Or they may chose quiet concealment.

I think of Charlie, a doorman in a modest New York City apartment building, whose attempts to cover up a problem nearly cost him his job. A tenant who admired Charlie's combination of quick mind and high energy had always wondered why he wasn't running a downtown law firm or claiming some other high achievement ground. Selfishly, she was glad of his service capacity but puzzled.

One day, she was expecting a piece of mail vital for the job she was working on at her computer upstairs. Not wanting to interrupt her project, she called downstairs and asked Charlie if he would sift through the morning's mail, find her letter, and bring it up. He put her off by saying the mail sorter hadn't come in yet. His job was to watch the door, and he shouldn't be responsible for other people's

“...remember that while unsupported weaknesses ache, unexercised talents itch.”

What's the Relationship Between Giftedness & Learning Issues?

work. She lost her temper. "Darn it, Charlie. I gave you a big tip last winter. Now I just need a little favor, and you won't help me out. What's the matter with you anyway?"

She snatched her coat from the hook, punched the elevator button, stormed out at the lobby floor, flinging her words at him. "Where's the mail? I'll do it myself. This isn't going to help you out at the Board meeting."

"I'm sorry. I'd do it if I could. Really."

His tone of voice made her look at him. Head hanging low and shaking from side to side, he repeated, "I'm sorry. I'd do it if I could. Really."

"Oh my gosh, Charlie. You can't read?"

"Nope. Never could."

"How did you get through school?"

"Faking. I faked my way through everything. I guess that's what I am. Fake."

There is help for some of the Charlies of this world, even at midlife, but how sad that he had to wait so long, using his energies for concealment instead of achievement.

An uncomfortable truth, revealed in countless research studies, is that correctional institutions, juvenile and adult, are filled with inmates who are imprisoned by their illiteracy as well as the bars on their cells and buildings. These are the different learners who turned their energies into attacks on a system that gave neither help nor support.

What's a Parent to Do?

So what's a parent to do? How do you help a child cope instead of dropping out, copping out, or cutting up? First, remember parents know their children better than any outsider. Sit down with a yellow note pad, and draw a line down the middle of the page. In one column write the settings and situations in which your child excels and is happy. On the other side, write down what things make your child restless, unhappy, scared, frustrated, or unsuccessful. Add to this list as time goes along.

Next, list forthcoming academic courses, noting which are apt to go well and which spell trouble. Involve your child in this analysis. With your child if possible, talk to the teachers in the plus column, "Jenny/Johnny is (I am) so looking forward to your class. It's a favorite subject. We'll all appreciate any projects you can weave into the assignments and classwork." Talk to the teachers of the difficult subjects before the course is under way. "Jenny/Johnny (I) will try really hard, but this area has traditionally been difficult. We will all help in any way we can. Do you have any suggestions, or shall we just agree to keep in close touch as the semester unfolds? Let's all try to keep ahead of the game."

Then remember that while unsupported weaknesses ache, unexercised talents itch. Budget time, money, and psychological energy for the exercise of talent, or for trying something new, as well as for remedial work. Along with ... or in spite of ... regular school work, keep talent and joy alive.

Get whatever outside help is necessary. Generally, parents cannot be their children's teachers. Struggling kids need privacy to work on difficult areas with a professional. Find a pro you trust; then trust the pro. Remove yourself from the direct scene while providing support from the sidelines.

What's the Relationship Between Giftedness & Learning Issues?

Don't live vicariously through your child's work. Be sure to have a visible life of your own. Try new things yourself ... tap dancing, crossword puzzles, photography, or yoga. Let your child see you tackling new challenges.

Finally remember your child's profile of strengths and weaknesses will be more like a drawing of the Alps than a picture of a gentle rolling countryside. One who can scale math heights with ease may stumble over spelling or reading comprehension. The big talker may have trouble getting ideas and words on paper. The science maven may struggle with foreign language. The jagged peaks will offer thrills and spectacular views though the journeys up and down may feel like a roller coaster.

Parents need to "Schwab the decks" by clearing away as many obstacles as possible and providing clear working surfaces. We all need to "make Whoopi" over what the child is good at. And, as parents and educators, we need to "Light'n up" by living, joyfully, **with** our children but not **for** or **through** them.



The Expert Answers: Priscilla Vail, M.A.T.

How Can Parents Help with Homework?

SchwabLearning.org asks:

Difficulty with homework is often a parent's first sign their child is experiencing learning difficulties. When parents spot homework problems, what should they do?

Priscilla Vail, M.A.T. Answers:

Homework is a fact of life for most children, but many parents are confused about their role in this daily drama and aren't sure how to mesh homework with the general dynamics of personal and family life. Here are some guidelines developed over my many years of family life and full-time teaching.

First, **obtain from the administrators of your child's school a statement of the homework policy**. If one doesn't exist, press for it. Putting philosophy and practice into concise wording will be beneficial all around. The statement should explain the purpose of homework and how much time students should realistically budget for it. For example, in elementary school the purpose might be reinforcement and practice of skills presented during the day. In middle school, the purpose might be to elaborate on concepts and information from class by doing projects, reading or writing on the same topic. In high school, the purpose might be independent gathering of new information to use in classroom discussion.

Next, ask for a **statement of purpose from your child's teacher**. Does the teacher's statement match the overall statement from the school? Ask what you and the student are expected to do in case of difficulty. After fourth grade, when curriculum becomes departmentalized, do teachers compare notes with one another to avoid giant overload? If not, an overall school policy should enforce such coordination. How much time should the child spend? A common rule of thumb is ten minutes per grade level.

Third, decide what your **family homework policy** will be. After all, it's called homework ... it's going to be done in your home. You need a family policy of when, where, how much, and what to do in case of trouble. You and your child need to be very clear about ownership. It is your obligation as a parent to provide time, space, and support, but the work belongs to the child.

You and your child should develop a **Time and Space Homework Pact**. Discuss whether homework comes right after school, after a snack, or after supper. Decide where homework will be done: at the kitchen table where there is companionable noise, in the bedroom where there are possible distractions of daydreaming, or in the living room where it is quiet. Children differ in their tolerance for distraction, their length of concentration span, and their ability to shift from one subject to another. All these differences and preferences should be taken into account in formulating the pact. Then the pact should be written out, signed, and posted with the understanding that it will remain in effect for 6 weeks. After that, there will be time for renegotiation. But having it in full view will dissolve and resolve daily disputes.

“Homework can be a welcome island of privacy, quiet, competence, and success in a people-crowded, noisy, demanding world.”

How Can Parents Help with Homework?

Drudgery is a part of any job or profession. Schooling has its share and often homework is where it shows. Memorizing vocabulary for a foreign language, the multiplication tables, or some history dates is a chore, but it's the only way to acquire some of the information basic to thinking. However, homework can be much more than that. Projects, such as making a diorama of a period in history or designing costumes or sets for a novel, liberate creativity, cement knowledge, and are enjoyable. Who says homework has to hurt? If your child's teacher hasn't assigned any such projects, ask for an appointment and inquire whether there will be any opportunities coming along. Offer to help. Remember that children who have trouble with reading and writing are often talented at hands-on projects. See if you can arrange ways to showcase your child's talents.

If you find that the reading level of your child's homework is too high, speak to the teacher. "Johnny is getting help with reading, so you know the importance we as a family place on that. But while he's struggling, could you reduce his reading homework? Could you choose a novel he could listen to on tape?"

As a parent, you also may have to read some assignments aloud to your child or get a simpler source of the information. A family I know well went through high school reading the *Golden Book Encyclopedia*. The student could get the overall information in easily legible and digestible form. Basic understanding gave other facts a framework.

Although human beings use many different kinds of memory depending on the task at hand, when we think about schooling, learning, and test-taking, we're apt to think only of rote memory. We can enhance memory with a three-part glue: physical experience, supportive emotional climate, and language. For example, if your child needs to learn the difference between "hogans" and "pueblos," let her make a model or draw a picture of each one, talk about what it would be like to live in each, attaching the terminology to the concept with easy conversation.

If understanding precedes memorization, facts stick. If your child needs to memorize arithmetic facts, first let the child use buttons, cubes, or blocks to represent the numbers involved. Then ask your child to draw the equation or situation. Only when that is done and fully understood should the child go to written numerals. And only when objects, drawings, and numerals all make sense should the child try to memorize.

Try to be sure any new information your child is trying to learn connects with something already familiar. It's the Velcro phenomenon: new information needs a place to stick. Children (and adults!) have a very difficult time attaching two unfamiliar to each other. For example, if a child doesn't have the concepts of islands and native populations, it's silly to try to teach about the aborigines of the Archipelago. Sometimes, you, as a parent, may have to find, invent, or learn the connectors.

Homework can be a welcome island of privacy, quiet, competence, and success in a people-crowded, noisy, demanding world. Your job as a parent is to provide the time and space structure, the peaceful environment, the contagious assumption your child can do the job, and the willingness to run interference if things zoom out of control.

Remember that emotions influence learning and schoolwork. Do all in your power to turn homework into an experience that will foster optimism and pride. Be willing to call a halt if it goes on too long and, with a calm voice and quiet determination, hold the institution to the policy it has declared.

Parents who have followed this 6-part series deserve thanks from the children on whose behalf they have read and thought. Since children may not think to, or know how to, thank such adults, let me be the conduit of their appreciation to you for your time and attention to them. Thanks and congratulations for having such a delicious responsibility!



The Expert Answers: Priscilla Vail, M.A.T.

Resources

Detecting Learning Problems

Books

About Dyslexia, Unraveling the Myth

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0935493344/schwabfoundation/

By Priscilla L. Vail, Linda Skladal

Beyond Baby Talk: From Sounds to Sentences, A Parent's Complete Guide to Language Development

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0761526471/schwabfoundation/>

By Kenn Apel and Julie J. Masterson

Common Ground: Whole Language and Phonics Working Together

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0935493271/schwabfoundation/>

By Priscilla L. Vail

Smart Kids with School Problems: Things to Know and Ways to Help

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0452262429/schwabfoundation/>

By Priscilla L. Vail

What's Wrong With Me?: Learning Disabilities at Home and School

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0912752386/schwabfoundation/>

By Regina Cicci

Words Fail Me: How Language Works and What Happens When It Doesn't

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1567620620/schwabfoundation/>

By Priscilla L. Vail

Websites

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

Language Development — Birth to Five Years

<http://www.asha.org/speech/development/languagedevelopment.cfm>

Emotions & Learning

Books

Emotion: The On/Off Switch for Learning

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1567620566/schwabfoundation/

By Priscilla Vail

Smart Kids with School Problems: Things to Know and Ways to Help

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0452262429/schwabfoundation/>

By Priscilla L. Vail

Resources

Emotions & Learning (continued)

Gifted Precocious or Just Plain Smart

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0935493093/schwabfoundation/>

By Priscilla L. Vail

Connect: 12 Vital Ties That Open Your Heart, Lengthen Your Life and Deepen Your Soul

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0743406214/schwabfoundation/>

By Edward M. Hallowell

Books

Educational Care

<http://main.wgbh.org/wgbh/shop/products/wg2178.html>

By Dr. Mel Levine

Straight Talk About Reading

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0809228572/schwabfoundation

By Susan L. Hall and Louisa C. Moats

Emotion: The On/Off Switch for Learning

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1567620566/schwabfoundation/

By Priscilla Vail

Smart Kids with School Problems: Things to Know and Ways to Help

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0452262429/schwabfoundation/>

By Priscilla L. Vail

Learning Styles: Food For Thought and 130 Practical Tips

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1567620051/schwabfoundation/>

By Priscilla L. Vail

The Misunderstood Child: Understanding and Coping With Your Child's Learning Disabilities

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/081292987X/schwabfoundation/>

By Larry Silver

What Standardized Tests Do and Don't Tell Us

Books

Smart Kids with School Problems: Things to Know and Ways to Help

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0452262429/schwabfoundation/>

By Priscilla L. Vail

A Language Yardstick

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1567620841/schwabfoundation/>

By Priscilla L. Vail

Failing Our Kids

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0942961269/schwabfoundation/>

By Kathy Swope (editor), Barbara Minor (editor)

Resources

What Standardized Tests Do and Don't Tell Us (continued)

Frames of Mind; the Theory of Multiple Intelligences

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0465025102/schwabfoundation/>

By Howard Gardner

True or False?: Tests Stink!

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1575420732/schwabfoundation/>

By Trevor Romain and Elizabeth Verdick

Websites

Trevor Romain and Elizabeth Verdick

Do No Harm: High Stakes Testing And Students With Learning Disabilities

<http://www.dralegal.org/publications/dnh.txt>

Jay P. Heubert and Robert M. Hauser, Editors

High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion, and Graduation

<http://pompeii.nap.edu/books/0309062802/html/index.html>

References

Reading Comprehension: Students' Needs and Teacher's Tools

by Priscilla L. Vail

Rosemont, N.J.: Modern Learning Press, 1999

Relationship between Giftedness & Learning Issues

Books

Emotion: The On/Off Switch for Learning

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1567620566/schwabfoundation/

By Priscilla Vail

Learning Outside the Lines

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/068486598X/schwabfoundation/

By Jonathan Mooney and David Cole

Smart Kids with School Problems: Things to Know and Ways to Help

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0452262429/schwabfoundation/>

By Priscilla L. Vail

Third-Fourth Grade Language Assessment

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1567620930/schwabfoundation/>

By Priscilla L. Vail

Gifted, Precocious, or Just Plain Smart

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0935493093/schwabfoundation/>

By Priscilla L. Vail

Crossover Children: A Sourcebook for Helping Children Who Are Gifted
and Learning Disabled

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0865862648/schwabfoundation/>

By Marlene Bireley

Resources

Relationship between Giftedness & Learning Issues (continued)

The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0156010755/schwabfoundation/>
By Antonio R. Damasio

Pretenders: Gifted People Who Have Difficulty Learning
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1892696061/schwabfoundation/>
By Barbara Guyer

Websites

Educational Resource Information Center
Dual Exceptionalities ERIC Digest
<http://ericec.org/digests/e574.html>

Parents & Homework

Books

Smart Kids with School Problems: Things to Know and Ways to Help
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0452262429/schwabfoundation/>
By Priscilla L. Vail

Homework Hero, Grades K-2: A Parent's Guide to Helping Their Kids With Afterschool Assignments
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0743222571/schwabfoundation/>
By Cynthia Johnson, Priscilla L. Vail, and Drew

Homework Hero, Grades 3-5: A Parent's Guide to Helping Their Kids With Afterschool Assignments
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/074322258X/schwabfoundation/>
By Cynthia Johnson, Priscilla L. Vail, and Drew

Homework Hero, Grades 6-8: A Parent's Guide to Helping Their Kids With Afterschool Assignments
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0743222598/schwabfoundation/>
By Cynthia Johnson, Priscilla L. Vail, and Drew

Five Homework Strategies for Teaching Students with Disabilities: ERIC Digest
<http://ericec.org/digests/e608.html>
By Educational Resource Information Center

Homework Without Tears: A Parent's Guide for Motivating Children to Do Homework
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0062731327/schwabfoundation/>
By Lee Canter

Websites

SchwabLearning.org
Avoiding Homework Wars
<http://www.schwablearning.org/Articles.asp?r=352>



Visit SchwabLearning's Online Resources



SchwabLearning.org is a parent's guide to helping kids with learning difficulties.

We'll help you understand how to:

- **Identify** your child's problem by working with teachers, doctors, and other professionals.
- **Manage** your child's challenges at school and home by collaborating with teachers to obtain educational and behavioral support, and by using effective parenting strategies.
- **Connect** with other parents who know what you are going through. You'll find support and inspiration in their personal stories and on our Parent-to-Parent message boards.
- Locate **resources** including Schwab Learning publications, plus additional books and websites.

SchwabLearning.org—free and reliable information at your fingertips, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.



Sparktop.org™ is a one-of-a-kind website created expressly for kids ages 8-12 with learning difficulties including learning disabilities (LD) and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD). Through games, activities, and creativity tools, kids at SparkTop.org can:

- Find information about how their brain works, and get tips on how to succeed in school and life.
- Showcase their creativity and be recognized for their strengths.
- Safely connect with other kids who know what they are going through.

SparkTop.org is free, carries no advertising, and is fully compliant with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA).

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