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Learning Disabilities No Reason to Fail

"Kids get less and less enthusiastic about school as they get older because the stress of school grows." Helen Cox, Options Center, Peoria Heights

It seems parents are bombarded from all directions these days with bad news about kids and learning disabilities.

There are two explanations; either there is an explosion of these problems in recent years or there's more attention being paid to it.

The answer is actually, a little bit of both.

"I do think there's a greater problem today," said Dr. Karen Elena, director of the Cognitive Therapy and Learning Center of Central Illinois in Peoria Heights. "It's because of the environment. We're not eating right and not breathing the right stuff."

Of course, not all learning problems experienced by children can be attributed to the environment.

Some children may just be unmotivated. Elena, however, said in her practice she estimates about 80 percent of her clients are experiencing a "learning lag."

The reasons for lags in learning are numerous. They include stress, birth anomalies and Attention Deficit Disorder.

And while the causes for problems in school can be numerous, the results of learning problems are largely the same, according to Elena: Frustration and lowered self-esteem.

Battling frustration, providing learning skills and giving a child a renewed sense of self-esteem is the goal of Elena's work.

"We work hard to re-establish self-esteem," Elena said. "We present them with tasks in the beginning we know they can do. We never harass them and use a lot of immediate praise. They quickly mend."

As a clinical psychologist with a specialty in neuropsychology. Elena has special insights into learning problems and how to deal with them. She is not alone in this work. Centers doing similar work with differing approaches are around Peoria, including the Sylvan Learning Center and the Options Center for Health and Education.

Whole brain

When it comes to working with academically challenged children, one of the more unique approaches to be found in this area is at the Options Center for Health and Education in Peoria Heights. Helen Cox runs the center and focuses on what she calls a "whole brain" approach to learning problems. With exercises, diet and lifestyle changes she has had success coordinating the three dimensions of the brain- which includes

1. left and right

2. upper and lower and

3. front and back

- to work together.

Helen said this is vital because the left and right portions of the brain control communication skills. The upper and lower portions of the brain control attitudes, motivation and emotion. The front and back portions of the brain control comprehension and focusing.

Getting the three dimensions of the brain working in sync and eliminating stress is the key to better grades and learning potential, Helen said.

"If kids learn under stress, they're going to recall the stress when they recall the information," Helen said. "Kids get less and less enthusiastic about school as they get older because as they get older the stress of school grows."

That stress she said in part comes from less and less time spent in school with kids learning by doing and more emphasis placed on book learning.

But, in the end, it is not Helen's insight into what causes stress or learning problems that makes her approach so interesting. It is the techniques she uses to diagnose problems.

To peer into a student's learning problems she peers into their hair.

With analysis of a child's hair, Helen gets insight into what is going on in the body and any deficiencies in their diet depriving them of needed vitamins or minerals.

It also allows her to look for toxins and imbalances that can hamper learning.

"When you have imbalances it can cause reading and comprehension problems," Helen said.

For example, she said, high cadmium levels means low zinc levels which in turns affects reading. Low calcium and high magnesium levels can translate to hyperactivity.

Helen and student doing Double Doodles.

While these types of correlations are not widely known in medical science, it is growing in acceptance scientifically, Helen said.