

SPECIAL REPORT

Hidden Reasons Kids Don't Learn and What You Can Do About Them



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Hidden Reasons Kids Don't Learn and What You Can Do About Them

Often the root causes of learning problems are not obvious and, as a result, go undetected and untreated. Think about how these “hidden” problems may be affecting your child’s learning:

Sensory Processing Problems

Children who cannot take in information (from the environment and from within their own bodies) and make sense of it struggle in a variety of areas. ***For some children the way things feel, smell, sound, or look can create chronic confusion that affects their ability to learn.*** Many of these sensory processing problems are not visible and, therefore, tend to go unrecognized. Begin watching your child’s reactions to environmental factors such as preferring dimly lit rooms over bright light, or avoiding certain places that are loud or have lots of things going on. These observations provide information about how a child’s system is, or is not, able to process things from the external environment. The same is true for difficulties processing sensations from within the body, such as the pressure from joints, or how things feel. Observing preferences (such as sitting on soft things instead of hard chairs) and watching movement (do they seem steady or off balance) can help identify these specific processing problems. Children who have difficulties processing input from inside and outside their bodies can have a variety of learning problems, such as an inability to

focus; difficulty following directions; sloppy handwriting; and difficulty learning academic skills. In our opinion, ***all children exhibiting learning problems should have their sensory processing evaluated to determine whether or not there are problems requiring treatment.*** If you suspect this may be an issue for your child, a specialist in sensory processing issues can help identify specific problems and develop a plan for treatment.

Vision Issues

As with sensory processing problems, vision issues often go unrecognized and untreated because they are not readily apparent. When we think about vision, we tend to think about acuity, or how well we can see things. In reality, ***there are other aspects of vision in addition to visual acuity that are critical for functioning;*** visual tracking (following something with your eyes), depth perception, and the connection between the eyes and the brain that allows us to interpret and make meaning from what we are seeing. Deficits in any of these areas can create significant learning problems for children. When children cannot adequately make sense of what they are seeing, they will have great difficulty learning to read, write, or do other academic skills. For example, children with poor visual tracking abilities struggle with reading because their eyes cannot smoothly follow written words and sentences on paper. Again, it is our opinion that ***all children with learning problems should be screened for vision problems beyond the typical visual acuity screening.*** Developmental optometrists and other professionals skilled in identifying and treating vision problems, such as

occupational therapists with specialized training, can help you identify and treat these problems.

Poor Motor Planning

Some children struggle with learning because their motor planning—their ability to sequence the physical actions required to carry out tasks—is poor. Motor planning deficits are closely linked to sensory processing problems, as ***the brain-body connection required for smoothly processing and carrying out movement is weak***. Children with poor motor planning can have problems that include not being able to dress themselves quickly, difficulty writing and cutting, and clumsiness with physical tasks such as running. Children with these deficits are often referred to as “immature” or “clumsy,” and frustration can quickly result in the classroom and at home. A professional specializing in sensory-processing and motor problems, such as an occupational therapist, can help identify and treat motor-planning problems.

Lack of Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the act of being aware of and attentive to what is going on at a given moment in time. It requires ***the ability to focus on what is happening and actively think about it to create meaning***. Children with learning problems often have difficulty being aware of, and really thinking about, what is happening around them. Distraction can play a significant role in this problem, as children may have the tendency to focus on things that are not important at the time. Very often, children are just trying to “get through” whatever task they are supposed to be working on, and complete them in very

surface-level or rote ways without actually thinking about what they are doing. Some specific areas where this becomes evident are ***reading for meaning (comprehension), using math for problem solving (going beyond computation), and writing meaningfully (not just regurgitating information)***. If these issues sound familiar to you in experiences with your child, it is critical to be aware of helping your child focus and think about what is happening around them. The information below on over-prompting is also related to this problem. For additional help in this area, seek out a specialist in child development, with skills in strengthening higher-level thinking. Work with a sensory-processing specialist may also be beneficial to address problems with inattention that impact the ability to be mindful.

Over Prompting

When children have learning difficulties, there can be a tendency on the part of adults to prompt them constantly in order to get things done. This can begin very early in a child's life, and becomes more prevalent as the child gets older. While adults do this with the best intentions in trying to help the child accomplish things, ***the result is often a child who does not learn to think about or complete things on his/her own.***

Consider the following kinds of prompts: "get your book out," "pay attention," "do this first and then that." When we are constantly giving children direct prompts, we are robbing them of opportunities to learn how to think and plan for themselves. Children who have this experience become so over-prompted that they begin to rely on the prompts to complete anything. This negatively impacts their ability to learn and think. There are many ways to use other methods of prompting that support children to move

out of the need for constant direct prompting, and into the realm of thinking and doing for themselves. ***Learning how to modify your communication to increase your child's ability to think about and do things on his/her own is critical for overcoming learning problems.***

You now have some information to help you think about and explore potential reasons for your child's learning problems. ***The next step is for you to contact professionals who can get you on the path to identifying your child's specific obstacles accurately, and help you in developing a plan to address them effectively.*** You can get all the information and support you need to **start this process by calling the Horizons team at (616) 698-0306 or sending an email to learning@horizonsdrc.com**. We look forward to helping you and your child learn strategies for improved learning, thoughtfulness, and independence!



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