

## ***Welcome to the New SchoolhouseTeachers.com Special Needs/Struggling Learners Section!***

### **When Your Child Continues to Struggle: What You Need to Know**

**By Judi Munday, M.A., M.Ed.**

If your child has consistently experienced difficulty with learning and schoolwork, you may be wondering if *you* are doing something wrong. You may even have asked yourself whether the child needs a different teacher or whether your child might be a “slow learner.” Perhaps you’ve wondered whether you are teaching with the right “learning style.”

All of these are appropriate concerns, but let me offer some reassurance! After helping hundreds of homeschool families, I’ve *seldom* found a parent to be the primary cause for a child’s learning struggles! The child may have learning disabilities, but there are countless other factors that interact to affect educational and social development: diet, environmental toxins, allergies, emotional issues, and/or immaturity.

Just to be on the safe side, you should check whether you are using the most effective approaches for instruction. For example:

- Do you review prior material before you introduce new skills?
- Do you provide *specific* feedback, clearly stating both what was done well *and* what the child should improve?
- When your child becomes “stuck,” do you stop to analyze the task or consider that he lacks pre-skills?
- If you are using effective teaching strategies, what else might be causing the problem?

Here is another possibility: your child may be *curriculum* disabled! His struggle may be due to poor curriculum design or inadequate teaching materials! Not all books and materials marketed to homeschool families are well designed or logically organized. Some texts don’t even teach the foundational skills your child needs to move ahead. Ask yourself: does your child’s textbook present

information in a well-sequenced way? Does it jump from topic to topic? Maybe the math or vocabulary books overemphasize drills or don't provide adequate practice. Remember, too, that even if a particular program worked splendidly for one of your children, that program could be a cause of some problems for *another* one. If so, consider trying a different curriculum or program. (Visit my website—[www.helpinschool.net](http://www.helpinschool.net)—to find out more about choosing a curriculum that is appropriate for your child.)

**IF YOU'VE** checked both your teaching and the curriculum, but you do not have the answers you need, then it's time to look *within* your child. Let's start with basic physical factors that impact learning: vision and hearing. Have you had them checked? In order to do school work, your child needs good vision. Your child may need corrective eyeglasses, but not *all* vision problems arise from poor acuity. Occasionally, reading delays have been linked to weak visual tracking. Practitioners know that students with dyslexia complain of fuzzy text, shifting letters, and other visual irregularities—even with 20/20 eyesight. You need to know that the most significant reading problems arise from deficits in how the brain processes sound-to-symbol relationships.

Your child needs good hearing as well as good eyesight to develop fluent language and communication skills. Communication is more than the child's ability to hear, speak, and attend to spoken language. There are three primary forms of language delay.

- *Expressive language delays* make it hard for the child to retrieve a particular word, or to put ideas into words, oral or written.

- *Receptive language delays* make it hard for the child to acquire new information or to understand what is read or heard. These make it hard for the child to remember new information.

- *Social language deficits* refer to the brain's interpreting *how* something is said versus *what* is said. These deficits are the nonverbal aspects of most communication: facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, and recognizing the appropriate physical space between two speakers.

Language or communication deficits spill over into every area of the child's world because language is at the heart of most academic work: reading, listening, remembering new information, and following multi-step directions. Delays in communication make it more difficult to master writing, spelling, and reading.<sup>1</sup> Deficits also affect behavior: children with language-processing deficits often display unprovoked outbursts, frustration, inattention, or fail to answer questions appropriately. The child may *seem* disobedient or forgetful—but he may be doing his very best to

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://asha.org/>

understand what you want from him! If your child passed his hearing test and yet displays similar behaviors, consider that it may be that your child's brain does not have the current ability to process what his ears can hear.

If you suspect a language-based delay, it is critical to seek outside help or testing at an early age, because research consistently shows that earlier interventions bring better long-term learning outcomes for the child.<sup>2</sup> For children on the autism spectrum there is even more emphasis on earlier intervention, and early research shows markedly better outcomes when therapies have begun as early as possible.

Many homeschool families prefer to “wait and see” when a child cannot communicate well in the early years or shows delays in learning to read; they hope things will get better as the child matures. Keep in mind, however, the time you spend waiting means opportunities have been lost for learning! It should come as no surprise that it is challenging to explain any struggling learner's behaviors in a simple way. The Bible reminds us that we are fearfully and wonderfully made.<sup>3</sup> Neurologists who study the infinite and varied complexities of the brain and its infinite functions have yet to adequately understand the brain's beautiful organization. We cannot view the details or the neurological circuits of the brain's activity, but we can learn a great deal from what we observe of a child's behaviors. We can then draw conclusions about the child's weaknesses.

**BY NOW**, you may have suspected that your child has some kind of learning disability. Beyond the “red flags” noted above, there may be significant differences between one subject and another (such as reading vs. spelling). Your child may be more than two years behind in basic skills of reading or math, but how can you be sure? It will help if you compare your child's present levels of performance to one of many developmental checklists available in books or online.<sup>4</sup> You can use an inventory called *Basic Skills: Essential Learning Objectives* to judge your child's approximate level of achievement,<sup>5</sup> or you may use your state's educational standards as a guide. You can obtain a developmental checklist from your pediatrician.

Whatever you choose, here is an assignment! Take that checklist, whatever it is, and write out an objective inventory listing your child's present strengths and weaknesses—subject by subject.

---

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.helpguide.org/mental/learning\\_disabilities.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/learning_disabilities.htm)

<sup>3</sup> The Holy Bible, Psalm 139:14

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ldonline.org/parents>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.basicsskills.net/Essential\\_Learning\\_Objectives.html](http://www.basicsskills.net/Essential_Learning_Objectives.html)

Focus primarily on oral and written language, math, and reading. You will have a much better idea about whether your child needs outside help.

Perhaps you *have* realized it is time to get professional help! So, what happens next? The Home School Legal Defense Association ([www.hslda.org](http://www.hslda.org)) can recommend a homeschool-friendly educational consultant—often in your immediate area. You may need a referral from your pediatrician to have insurance coverage for outside professionals to do comprehensive testing. If family finances are limited, U.S. federal law provides that local public school systems must determine whether any child in the local system has a disability that limits learning. That means they must do whatever testing may be necessary to address the federal mandate—at no cost to you. Always make such requests in writing! Your documentation will be helpful should your child require special services or testing accommodations, or when the child applies for college admission in the future.

Once you contact a professional to evaluate your child, he or she will ask about your child's educational and medical history, including birth complications, childhood illnesses or emotional trauma, early learning behaviors, and social skills. You will be asked to describe the *specific* academic behaviors that cause your particular concern. Here is where your objective inventory can be invaluable. Try to be as thorough as possible. Small details are often of great significance to an evaluator or professional, since they lead to insights that may be very important.

After the background information is compiled, the professional will administer a battery of diagnostic tests and observe how your child performs specific tasks or answers standardized test items. All your input *and* the testing scores lead to finding a diagnosis that can clarify *why* your child has experienced ongoing struggles. It is *critical* that you understand: a diagnosis is not a label! A careful diagnosis links your child's unique needs with the most effective teaching strategies and remedial interventions! A thorough evaluation will reveal the details about your child's needs that will help you create a detailed roadmap for a successful outcome in your child's educational future. Since you know your child best, you should ask the Lord for wisdom as you interpret what you learn.

The professional should make recommendations for your child's educational program. If you don't understand information in the professional's report, ask as many questions as you need to fully understand the findings! *Don't become overwhelmed by jargon—it is OK to ask for terms to be clearly explained, because a test report won't help your child unless you know how to apply it.*

**NEXT MONTH**, I will share how to take diagnostic test findings and your own learning inventory to create an Individualized Student Educational Plan (SEP). The SEP is a powerful tool that can help you to clarify educational/learning goals for your child because it lays out yearly goals to improve the most significant weaknesses. I will show you how to break those yearly goals into short-term goals so you can both plan your instruction and assess your child's progress in a more objective way. Once we've covered making a plan, I'll be sharing monthly tips on teaching strategies and effective tools for adapting instruction to meet your child's needs.

### **Judi Munday PHOTO**

*Judi Munday has a heart to equip, educate, and encourage parents of children with special needs. She earned her M.Ed. degree at the University of Illinois in 1968 in special education for culturally disadvantaged preschool children. In 1985, she earned a second Masters degree at Regent University in Virginia Beach, VA, where she focused her study on specific learning disabilities. After almost 15 years of teaching in Christian schools and in the mission field of public schools, she started her own business in 1999, HIS Place for Help in School.*

*For the last 13 years, Judi has served homeschool families of children with special needs. She offers diagnostic testing and consultation for parents (in person or by telephone). With her husband as webmaster, she maintains an informational website, [www.helpinschool.net](http://www.helpinschool.net), where parents can find practical, evidence-based teaching strategies.*

*Judi has presented numerous workshops at home school support groups and statewide conferences in Louisiana, Hawaii, and Virginia. She currently holds a Post-Graduate Professional Teaching License in Virginia. In 2003, she compiled and wrote the "Special Needs Education" section for the Home Educators of Virginia Homeschool Manual (now in its 3<sup>rd</sup> edition). She has self-published two books: Teaching Your Special Needs Child: Teaching Strategies and Tools That Really Work and Writing a Student Education Plan, both of which are available through her website.*

*Judi has been married to John for 47 years, and they are blessed to be the grandparents of ten homeschooled grandchildren, ages 5 to 15.*