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Learning Strengths- Concentration & Attention Andrew Fuller

Many young people have trouble settling themselves & focusing. Some of these kids will have diagnoses of attention deficit & hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or attention deficit disorder (ADD), others not. Either way, knowing their learning strengths will help them.

These kids have energy to burn. They turn the volume up to eleven & keep it there. They wake up early ready to fly. Others hold it together all day long and then collapse into a morass of behavioural issues later in the day or evening.

They are often mentally tired. It is a tough combination being tired and restless at the same time. The accelerator pedal is close to the floor but the steering isn't working.

Living with these kids is challenging. Some don't settle & they don't sleep for long. For some, the completion of an hour of homework takes 4 hours with screaming. They live in messy rooms, write work projects in messy hand-writing & have even messier life schedules. Parenting them is like trying to grab hold of a live salmon.

I have written about helping parents support these kids in my books. The long term aim is not for you to manage these kids but for them to manage themselves. This paper is about helping them manage their learning.

These kids are like belly buttons

Some are 'innies' and some are 'outies'. We tend to notice the 'outies' a lot more than the 'innies.' That's because they are louder.

The "innies"

These kids are dreamy, switched off people who may appear not to listen. They have short attention span for regular events & can't stand doing boring things.

Some 'innies' will have ADD. When some of them try to concentrate, the level of activity in their frontal lobes decreases. Their brain turns off when it should be turning on.

In terms of learning, 'innies' often struggle with:

- Organising -can start but not finish things,
- Time management & estimation
- Prioritising & sequencing
- Focusing & shifting attention
- Sustaining effort
- Processing information
- Memory
- Self-control of actions

The 'outies'

Some of the 'outies' have diagnoses of (ADHD). Being an outie is like owning a sportscar fitted with the brakes that would struggle to stop a bicycle.

'Outies' often struggle with:

- Controlling their impulses
- Managing when things are quiet & settled

One of the strongest predictors of well-being & resilience in both types of these kids is to help them be successful in life & school. Unassisted, the long-term prospects for these kids can be worrying.

Spatial reasoning

Often an area of learning strength as they can often think more powerfully in images than in long strands of words. Increasing this learning strength will also promote their ability to 'read' other people.

Perceptual and motor skills

Careless or clumsy? While these kids can be quite physical, they can also be quite accident prone. Developing this learning strength through sport, rock wall climbing, martial arts or high intensity training benefits their learning.

These kids often prefer to do things rather than sit back and reflect on things. Their high octane energy levels mean they are usually enthusiastic about physical activities & sports.

Individual sports will suit some of them more than team sports where higher levels of people smarts are required.

If there are difficulties in handwriting, spatial skills, fine motor development or sensory perception, further assessment may help.

Concentration and memory

Most of these kids underachieve at school because of their poor concentration & inability to focus on a task.

Exercise will help some. Others will benefit from reminders on smart phones and devices to keep track of time & to remind them to do different activities or tasks.

They need consistency but they need stimulation to pay attention. The aim is a state of relaxed stimulation.

Their chronic exposure to stress hormones decreases immunity & tears up cells in their hippocampus often resulting in memory problems.

Planning and sequencing

These kids take a crisis management focus to life. They seek adrenaline. The moment is what matters to them.

Organizational skills are often poor & they can't follow through.

Take a load off these kids' minds by suggesting options, "Would you like to do ... first or ... first?" If they refuse those, add another option & repeat, "So would you like to do ... (new option) or or ... first?" Let them make decisions.

Help them develop the art of writing things down, making to-do lists, making notes & prioritising.

Have them keep a master folder with a separate section for each subject and make sure everything that goes into the notebook is put in the correct section. Keep subjects colour-coded.

Thinking and logic

Almost invariably they act before they think which leads to learning problems. As they are dramatic and conflict seeking some will love the 'cut and thrust' of debates, ethical dilemmas & philosophical disputes.

People smarts

Most of these kids have interpersonal problems because it is generally not helpful to say to other people everything you think. Their energy and impulsivity can be seen by others as can be tactless and thoughtless.

Learning people reading and conversational skills is a major long term advantage.

Language and word smarts

This learning strength can be developed through theatre sports, acting and debating. The intensity of life for some of these kids means they seek calm and refuge in graphic novels.

Number smarts

Relate numbers to activities- distance, speed, force, impact. You will often get further in this area assisting kids to develop trails, jumps and skate ramps than by talking about numbers abstractly. Try to include a physical option outdoors wherever you can.

In summary too many of these kids conclude they are not clever & can't succeed at school. This is not true. It takes some time and planning to create a clear learning success plan but the payoffs are substantial.

Careful thought about helping them identify & build learning strengths makes a major long-term difference to their lives.

At school they may need extra time on tests, a quiet room, oral clarification of tasks and assistance to focus on important issues.

Of course, the strategies mentioned in this paper don't only apply to young people. They may also help some adults.

More information

Andrew's website

www.mylearningstrengths.com has helped over 27,000 young people in the past year discover their learning strengths.

On face book:

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Learning Strengths

Books for Parents

Unlocking Your Child's Genius

Tricky Behaviours

The A to Z of Feelings (Bad Apple Press)

Book for Teachers

Neurodevelopmental Differentiation- Optimising Brain Systems To Maximise Learning (Hawker-Brownlow).

