Teaching Children With Learning Problems

by Jane Petersen

It has been my privilege for more than ten years to teach Covenant children with learning problems. During the past few years it has become increasingly evident to many that it is our obligation to teach *all* the children God has given us.

Children with learning problems can be divided into two groups, the learning disabled and the slow learners.

A learning disability has been described thus:

> "A learning disability is a problem in one or more areas of learning. It can be a specific school subject, like math, reading or language. It can be a whole learning area such as problems in learning things through seeing them or hearing them. While we may not know the cause, we know that it is not mental retardation, poor sight, bad hearing, or emotional problems." 1

Each day the number of children with learning disabilities grows larger. They often are children of the middle class from culturally enriched homes and have average or above average intelligence.

The slow learner, on the other hand, has been described thus:

> "The slow learner is typically the child who obtains an I.Q. score from 80-90 and whose functioning in academic areas is from one to two years behind grade level." 2

These children can be helped in a variety of ways. In larger schools they are commonly helped in the resource room or remedial room. However, many of the methods employed in these specialized settings can be used in the classroom.

In helping, one must first understand the child and his problems. Too often he is tolerated rather than welcomed. Further, before he can be helped the child must first understand himself, and must be willing to admit to himself and others that a

problem exists.

It is of critical importance that parents understand the child's problems, limitations, and capabilities. The greatest disservice that parents can do for a child with learning problems is to refuse to accept the problem. The child knows there are problems. The other children in the class also realize that problems exist. As christian parents we certainly must be willing to accept the children that God has given us as they have been given not as we think they should have been. To pretend that real and obvious problems do not exist is to make additional problems for the child. The child who feels that his parents are disappointed in him because he is not as other children is often thrust into a cruel cycle of failures, the scars of which last for life.

The teacher must accept the fact that in a class of thirty children many differences arise. All the children will not be able to fit a certain rigid predetermined standard. One cannot expect uniform performance of the lot. It is easy for a teacher to sit back and say a student is lazy, or doesn't care, and it may be true. Another possibility, however, is that these characteristics developed as a defense mechanism when the student found out that no one seemed to understand him or cared about helping him.

After the proper learning climate has been established, the child's strengths and weaknesses should be evaluated. There are many diagnostic tools that can be used. However, one of the best methods of evaluation is the classroom teacher. She can observe the child while he is reading. What happens when the child is confronted with a new word? Does he stop and refuse to respond? Or does he look at the beginning of the word and guess at the rest of it? Does he try to sound out the word or perhaps look at the word's configuration? Once the teacher has decided on her plan of action she must share these plans with her student. Even the youngest child wants to know what must be accomplished and what is expected of him.

Unfortunately all children with similar problems will not achieve success with the same materials. A child may continue to fail and lack motivation unless the teacher finds the proper teaching techniques and materials. In my classroom I have one group of children from fifth through eighth grade who have been very successful in working together. Some of my students are excellent oral readers but are poor in comprehension. When they are paired with a student who reads haltingly but comprehends well, excellent team work can result. The teacher should select

materials, then, that meet the students' individual needs. Many materials have been designed for specifio learning problems. These materials need not involve a large outlay of money if the teacher has the time to make them.

Learning packets are excellent tools for the child with learning problems. The packet should have simple directions, be colorful, involve movement and provide immediate feedback.

Games or tools can be made by the students. Many junior high students still have trouble following directions. I hope to work in a combination reading, science, and art project by having the students make electric boards. These completed boards provide an interesting way to review various concepts. Once the actual boards are made, the teacher can make a variety of programs for them.

A word of caution is needed here. One must be careful that the student is not pushed ahead too fast. It is a temptation for a teacher to move on to another area too quickly. Even though a student has reached success in an area, he should review it so that he will permanently retain that knowledge.

When working with children having learning problems, a routine is especially necessary. Students should know what their schedule is, so that this schedule will soon become a routine for them.

The cause for many reading problems can be traced to a visual problem. Some misunderstanding between the school and the parents can have its roots in this problem. Most schools have regular vision screening. This fact may make matters even worse. The type of test that is usually given proves that the child is or is not nearsighted. Often the fact that a student has passed such a test makes parents or teacher judge that the student does not have a vision problem and that poor performance is a result of laziness or lack of motivation.

Fisher says, "Of the hundred children referred to me because of problems in reading, almost 90 percent suffer from a visual problem. Most of these problem readers score well on the Snellen test." 3

All children with learning problems should have a complete eye test. This should include tests of the following: acuity — farsighted and nearsighted, binocular fussion — alighment of both eyes, convergence — the movement of eyes together in unison, fixation — eye movement in reading, pursuit of fixations — the ability to follow moving targets, and form perception. If the student has difficulty with any of these eye functions and

corrective steps are not taken, he will probably experience frustration during reading class. A thorough eye test is the first step in diagnosing a reading problem.

When dealing with children in the first and second grade, reading success should not be confused with strong visual memory. It is possible for a child to develop an adequate sight vocabulary and be classified as a good reader. Suddenly, when he gets to the third grade, he finds it impossible to memorize all the new words and his troubles begin. The result is often that the child is called lazy or the teacher is classified as being "too hard".

I have discussed some of the problems of our students. However, there are a number of children who are not in one of our own schools. We have made a start but there are still many areas where we do not provide for our children. Where I teach we have an estimate of from fifteen to twenty children who must rely on the public schools for their education. The pressing need seems to be in the field of educable mentally retarded. These children have strong convictions and become very upset when they are forced into situations contrary to their religious beliefs. It has been my experience that the Lord who has given to these children simple minds has also endowed them with deep spiritual faith and trust in Him.

Each time we make room in our schools for another group of handicapped children we come a little closer to our goal to teach *all* our children.

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1 Marnell L. Hayes, **The Tuned-in-Turned-on Book About Learning Problems** (San Rafael; Academic Therapy Publications, 1974), p. 21.
2 Hubert Vance, "A New Look at Slow Learners," **Slow Learners Workshop**, April 1978, 13.
3 Johanna Fisher, A Parents' Guide to Learning Disabilities (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978), p. 6.

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When I give my children into the care of a schoolmaster, it is not my intention that the child is to look to the schoolmaster forever; nor do I expect the teacher to make him rich but only that he will teach and bring up my son well."

"Sermons on the Gospel of John"
-Martin Luther