

## **Children With Special Needs**

I have been working with school children since 1970, mostly within the primary ages of 5-11 but more recently with children up to the age of 16. Throughout this time I have had a particular interest in children who have had difficulty in accessing the normal programmes of work. These are children who have Special Educational Needs ( SEN). When I was a primary head teacher I developed a special unit for children with severe needs and working with the gifted professionals I appointed to work in this unit helped me to really understand these children's problems and how best to help them. We were not always successful, the range of some of their problems was very wide, but for some of them we were able to make a real difference to their lives.

In the process of building my website, steps2learning, I have been contacted many times by parents of SEN children, especially dyslexic children, for help. The materials on this site are suitable for most children but I recognise that there is a group who perhaps need something slightly different. So I have begun to think about the kind of problems these children face and how I can try to help.

### **What are the signs that children are struggling ?**

Schools should be able to spot children who may have special needs quite early in reception. They have a number of baseline assessments that alert them to potential problems and these should be discussed with parents at the earliest possible time. Some children might slip through the net but such are the testing and assessment systems now in schools that children with special needs should be highlighted quite early on in their school life. The more obvious indicators of children with SEN would be:

- Poor performance against the normal indicators for their age group;
- Slow to get on task;
- Not finishing work;
- Anxiety about school in general and not wanting to go to school;
- Worrying at home : poor sleep, not eating, weepy;
- Trying to do anything else but the task in hand, from getting into mischief by disturbing others to pretending to be ill, going to the toilet a lot, etc.
- Extremely shy and not entering into class activities;
- Answers questions in simple words or phrases;
- Doesn't play well outside, often isolated and has difficulty in making and keeping friends.... and often bullied by teasing;
- Doesn't work well in a group;
- Clumsy , poor motor skills;
- Very good verbal skills yet not being able to put ideas onto paper;
- Poor memory – cannot remember basic number and letter facts.

### **What are the causes of underachieving ?**

#### **Physical :**

There are a number of medical reasons why children would be underachieving, these are some of the main ones:

- Dyslexia – problems with language development;
- Dyscalculia – problems with mathematical development;
- Dyspraxia – problems with gross and fine motor skills;

- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder ( ADHD) – problems with concentration and behaviour control;
- Autistic Spectrum Disorder, including Aspergers Syndrome – a complex mixture of the above which is difficult to diagnose.
- Memory problems – recent research by Durham University says that as many as one in ten pupils have learning problems owing to having a poor memory, that is, the memory we use to store and manipulate information.

Researchers and educationalists have written numerous books on all of the above subjects, just put one of the above titles into Google and see how many references come up ! These problems are not curable, if they were then whoever invented the cure would be a millionaire by now !! The way to avoid the worst of these conditions is by early recognition and appropriate teaching methods.

### **Emotional :**

- At some point in their lives children who suffer with any of the above will realise they are different from other children. If a child has a good circle of caring friends then the stress at primary school will be minimised..... but watch out when they go to secondary school as they will encounter children who will have no allegiance to them;
- Family break-ups can have a drastic effect on children.... how can a child concentrate at school when they have witnessed arguments at home ?
- Frequent moving can affect children. Children who frequently change schools often put up barriers to new friends as they don't want to be disappointed when they move on;
- A sudden , dramatic change in their lives, such as a bereavement or birth, can have a short term affect on their performance in school;
- Bullying is the most frequent reason why parents say their child is unhappy in school and thus the biggest reason why they withdraw their child to home educate. This can sometimes be a difficult and complex issue for a school to sort out and occasionally it is not always the one who doesn't want to go to school who was the victim!
- Children who have Summer birthdays are often less mature than those with Autumn birthdays. There could be over 11 months difference between some children in the same class and this can affect their learning progress, certainly initially.

This list can go on and on as children are extremely sensitive to changes both at home and at school. Sometimes it could be as simple as a pencil going missing that has upset a young child or for older children a fallout with a friend. In most cases a little TLC and understanding / support from parents and the school will help children through their personal crises. You would be a very lucky parent if your child does not go through some crises during their school life. Good communications between home and school are essential so no misunderstandings could happen.

### **So how do we help children who have learning difficulties ?**

Diagnosing why a child is having difficulties is the first task and probably the most difficult. Schools have batteries of assessments based on tests and observations. They also have access to specialists who can assess for specific problems like dyslexia. But

children are all so different and in most cases have more than one problem, often a mixture of the physical and emotional.

But, no matter what the problems are, there are **common characteristics** for all intervention programmes that schools or parents can give:

- **One-to-one help** : this can be very useful at primary level where children generally respond well because they are made to feel special. At secondary school there could be problems because children don't like to be singled out and having a helper can cause teasing. Should this extra help be in class or should they be withdrawn? I have often heard of older students being frustrated because they have been withdrawn from the one lesson they really enjoy, often a practical lesson like art or PE where no reading or writing is involved so they can take part with equal skill with the rest of the class. I think the way forward is for the school to negotiate with the student how and when this help is given.
- **The helper having patience and understanding.** Effective helpers are very precious in schools, they don't shout or get cross, they have extreme patience and they really get to know the child. They are often skilled at being able to change strategies quickly, often needed when a child comes into school in a stressed state.
- **Having a programme that moves forward in small achievable steps.** A good practitioner, as mentioned above, will make any well structured programme work. The Reading Recovery programme was a great success, but was it the programme itself or the fact that children were given regular one-to-one help by a skilled practitioner? I believe a mixture of both.
- **Short and frequent lessons** . Many children with SEN have memory problems, therefore they need a different approach from the bulk of the other children. Daily short , frequent lessons, we call it the drip- feed way, can be very effective instead of one long weekly lesson when children can easily forget what the lesson was all about. For example they could have a 15-20 session at the start of the day then two more short 5-10 sessions during the day to remind them about the focus of the work.
- **Recognising that all children with learning difficulties have two things in common – they have poor self confidence and self esteem.** Children with learning difficulties will say their work is rubbish and that they are useless. They may even tear their work up and throw it into the bin! If they are going to make any progress then this lack of self confidence and esteem needs to be addressed. They need to begin to feel good about themselves. This isn't as easy as it sounds and will take a lot of hard work by the adults working with the children. It is worth reminding ourselves that we need to :
  - give lots of praise, children love stars and stickers;
  - give work that is achievable;
  - be sensitive to when the child is struggling and intervene quickly;
  - have fun time, like playing games that they can win;

- at the end of the session remind the child how successful they had been, no matter how small, so they finish on a positive note;
- don't get angry or frustrated yourself, sometimes children will deliberately try to antagonise to see how you react;
- ask the child to show their work to someone else when they have made a really good effort;
- they can work towards a reward.....bribery really does work !

### **How can steps2learning help ?**

Children need a dual approach to language: learning key words and phonics. They need a sight vocabulary bank of the most used high frequency words and they need a phonic knowledge so that they have strategies for tackling unfamiliar words.

So far on the site I have designed materials appropriate for each year group. So an SEN child in year 4 may do work designed for year 3 or even 2. I have provided resources for the government's *Letters and Words* scheme, in particular phases 2 and 3 where initial sounds and key words are looked at. Most of these are very much of the learning style of look, read and write. I recognise that some children with SEN need a different style.

I have now designed a new programme of looking at initial blends. This programme takes into account the overall shape of the word and it has a more visual approach, such as the use of colour. This approach takes into account the memory problems these children have. By cutting out letters and putting them into the correct order, looking at the word shapes and tracing the words before writing we are reinforcing the spelling of the words and helping the child to remember the word. Doing this work at least three times a day, as in the drip feed method described above, will also reinforce their memory of the words. This should work alongside studying a few key words each week ( see next page for details) .

How fast you work through the programme depends on the child. At first they may only get through one set in a week. I advise you go over the words every day until they can read all the words independently and write 80% correctly. Once they get used to the learning style and build in confidence from initial successes they may be able to complete two sets in a week – one set Monday and Tuesday, the second set Wednesday and Thursday and revise both sets on Friday.

On the next page is a detailed breakdown on how to use the materials..... good luck!

## Guidance Notes for Language Programme

### **Learning Key Words :**

1. Key words practice should take place every week.
2. Assess your child with how well they can read the 100 key word list, there is a record sheet for you to record what they know.
3. If your child knows most of the words see if they can spell them. If your child can spell a good majority of the words just concentrate on those words they got wrong. Copy out 5 or 6 and make flash cards with them. Leave them around the house and practice them several times a day for a week. Practice writing them at least once a day then retest at the end of the week.
4. If your child knows very few words, less than half, then run off one of the sets of words each week – there are enough sets for an eleven week programme with 10 words in each set.
5. Cut out the flash cards and use them several times a day for reading practice and at least once a day for writing practice. Your aim is by the end of the week the child can read and spell all the words in the set.
6. Run off two sets of the words, cut them up and play a pairs game.
7. Cut up the words into individual letters, jumble them up and then make up the words. You put out the correct letters but put them into the wrong order to see if your child can spot the mistake. Ask them to do the same for you.
8. Practise putting the words into alphabetical order.
9. Stick the words into a scrap book so you can go back to them at a future date.
10. Go on to the next 200 word list and repeat the above.

### **Phonics - Beginning Blends:**

1. The phonics programme looks at all the main two consonant blends from **bl** to **wr** . I have used colour and word shapes to stimulate the visual memory of each new word.
2. Pages 1 and 2 : The first page is for cutting up and making new words with the initial blend. For each new word the child needs to find the correct word shape on page 2 and write the word with letters in the correct boxes.
3. Pages 3 and 4 : These two pages are about tracing over the word in the light colour and then copy on the blank lines.
4. Page 5: Each word is put into a context of a sentence. The adult should read the sentence stopping at the new word for the child to read. Help them instantly if they stumble. Repeat this several times allowing the child to read more and more. What is happening is that the child ends up memorising the sentences.
5. The initial session will probably take about 15-20 minutes, especially for the writing. Keep the cut out letters and return to them at least two more times during the day and every day for a week. They may like to choose a few sentences to write out in their book. With the key word work as well you are looking at a total of 40-50 minutes each day spread over 2-3 sessions.
6. If your child speeds up and wants more to do then either go to the Next Step literacy section and look at the more advanced work on initial blends (they mirror this SEN programme) or try to do two sets in a week.