

THOUGHTS AND SOLUTIONS FOR STRUGGLING LEARNERS

What is a struggling learner?

A struggling learner is a student who has difficulty keeping up with classmates of the same age in a developmentally appropriate learning environment.

The struggling learner does not qualify for special education services, or in many cases for remedial or other school services. Where as the learning disabled child has peaks and valleys in knowledge and skill levels, often the struggling learner's strengths and needs can be described as "flat." Struggling learner's often:

- Have difficulty organizing themselves and their work environment.
- Do not take oral instructions the first time given.
- Are overwhelmed by work tasks and need work chunked for them.
- Have weak social and emotional skills.

These children can easily fall between the cracks of the educational system unless we provide them with the assistance they need.

Why are classroom teachers faced with an increasing number of struggling learners?

These children lack two fronts: their environment is lacking in the support and stimulation that allows them to learn some of the basic knowledge they need in order to succeed in school; and the energy required to survive in poverty, in stressful, sometimes dysfunctional home environments, robs children of the focus and concentration they need in the classroom.

Will a summer school program cure these children?

If a child is lagging only slightly behind in class, he may enter school in the fall more on a par with the other children. However, a summer program cannot accelerate the child's normal learning process, and if a child is a year behind the rest of his class, he is certainly not going to catch up to the other students in two or three months' time. The child who does catch up in September may start to lag behind again as the year progresses, because he is operating within his *normal learning pace*.

It is important to recognize that struggling learners *do not need to be cured*. Rather, they need material presented to them in a variety of ways, and in small chunks; and they need to be able to work in ways that show what they know while adapting to their special circumstances.

Is retention a viable option for the struggling learner?

Struggling learners are working at their natural capacity. They will not rise to the top of their class with an extra year, but will continue to struggle as their classmates move on, because there is a disparity in their skill level and ability to

learn compared with their “regular” classmates. All the extra time in the world will not change that.

The Intervention Assistance Team should evaluate the child and determine, among other things, whether the child is truly a slow learner or just developmentally young. Once the team that the child is a slow learner, it can discuss, as a group, interventions and adaptations that will help the student succeed in the new grade.

Are there adaptations I can make in my teaching without changing a lot of materials?

Yes there are many things you can do:

- Begin by teaching in a variety of modalities. Most teachers have been in a combination auditory and visual style, listening to a college professor lecture in front of a large class while the professor while the professor writes information on the blackboard. We tend to carry that method of teaching into our classrooms. Unfortunately, struggling learners seldom learn well in a strictly auditory or visual manner, but need other methods, including tactile/kinesthetic experiences and a lot of interpersonal activities.
- Break the students work into small, bite-size pieces. Instead of a whole chapter on Monday to be completed by Friday, assign the student six to eight pages a night.
- Have a study buddy assigned to every student. The struggling learner can share study notes and call her study buddy with homework questions.
- Have materials and lessons taped for students. This will allow struggling readers to keep up with the class in terms of content. The student can also use the tapes to help follow along with written material.
- Give students plenty of breaks throughout the day. A break could be something as simple as walking to the office for supplies, feeding a class pet, or collecting papers.

These adaptations can become a natural part of the teacher’s bag of tricks in dealing with all students on a daily basis.

How can I help gray-area learners organize themselves and their materials?

School is usually the first time a child is expected to be organized, so you have your work cut out for you. Here are some tips that are helpful for all students, but particularly for the struggling learner:

- Have a laminated “To Do” list on the child’s desk. This will help the child organize his time.
- Have the child list the day’s activities, then check off each item as it is completed.

- Have the student keep materials in the same location each day - a cubby, a mailbox, chair pack, or desk.
- Teach the student to make a desk map to help organize the materials inside.
- Color-code book covers by subject, and have matching color-coded notebooks for the student – red for math, blue for writing for instance.
- Use a parent letter or assignment book to keep parents informed of upcoming events and requirements. If necessary, ask parent to sign the assignment book each night (after checking to see that the assignment has been completed) and return the book to the school with the student the following day.
- At the end of each week, send home a summary sheet tallying work completed, test or paper scores, and class participation.

What do I tell other students who say, “It’s not fair that Johnny gets to do it a special way”?

It is our role as teachers to communicate to students that we all have our strengths and needs in life. Some of us can do cursive writing others excel with printing. Some students can play baseball, others hockey. Most importantly, we need to get across the idea that “fair” doesn’t mean that everyone gets the same things in life; it means that everyone gets what he or she needs in order to succeed in life.

At the same time, try to avoid having struggling learners get too much special treatment. When one student uses a fun adaptation such as post-it note writing, let other students try it too. If a student gets to do an oral book report rather than a written one, provide that option for other students as well, at least some of the time. Once in a while, give a test and allow all students to circle the ten questions they want to answer on the test.

Most importantly, we need to model behavior for students by presenting ourselves as individuals who struggle and ask for help in some areas, and excel in others.

Should I grade these students differently than other students in my room?

If a school district continues to grade and evaluate progress with a standardized letter report card, classroom teachers need to document all accommodations made for a struggling learner in order to assist next year’s teacher. It is also important to document the adaptations and accommodations made for a student for his parents, and to keep the parents well informed about the child’s progress and the use of specific accommodations. For instance:

- Has the teacher read all the tests to the child?
- Has the reading material been taped for the child?
- Have directions given orally to the class also been written for the child?
- Has the material been retaught in a variety of ways?

Many school districts attach an accommodations sheet to the child's report card to inform both the parents and next year's teacher of the accommodations.

Schools who have begun to use anecdotal records, authentic assessment, and portfolios to evaluate students are more likely to get more accurate view of what their struggling learners can do.

Struggling learners may need *some* accommodations in *some* areas, rather than across the curriculum. For instance, a child can compute mathematics problems, but can't do as many in the same amount of time as the average learner. Another student may find an oral book report easier to do than a written one. In both instances, the accommodations show mastery of the subjects and skills that need to be measured.

When the amount of needed accommodations for a particular child exceeds the amount of learning taking place, it may be necessary to provide the child with more individually designed instruction in the form of special education.

How should I handle test taking with my struggling learners?

Test taking needs to be modified for struggling learners, just as note taking and projects are adapted. Here are some adaptations that can be used as needed:

- For students with reading difficulties, read the tests to them.
- Provide a study guide to help students study before the test.
- Give untimed tests to students who work more slowly than their classmates.
- Give tests in small chunks. Alternatively, tell children to work on the test for twenty minutes; they will be scored only on what they complete.
- Have children try the whole test, then circle the ten questions on which they want to be scored.
- Allow children to use ten out of twenty spelling words when they are first assigned. The children understand that they can study these words, and will only be tested on these words.
- Alternatively, the child can take the entire test, but will only be scored on these ten words.
- Give students an open-book test or notebook test, where they can use their class work for assistance.
- Try giving struggling learners the first letter of each answer as a clue.
- Allow these students to use word banks or answer keys during these tests.

How can I help parents better understand and support their child?

All parents want their children to succeed; when it becomes evident that a child is having difficulty in school, parents experience tremendous anxiety. It's important for the school to provide as much information as they can, as well as a lot of support, for these parents as they work with the school to help their child.

A child experiencing problems academically may have been informally evaluated by a classroom teacher, or the evaluation may have gone beyond that

to some type of formalized assessment tools or even special education screening.

Whatever form the evaluation takes, parents need to be given a complete, accurate understanding of the results, and the steps the school plans to take to address the child's learning difficulties. Parents need to be told: "Here's what we think the difficulty is; here's what we plan to do about it; here's what we hope to accomplish."

It's important to explain to parents the curriculum, the classroom structure, and instructional strategies utilized on a day-to-day basis in their child's classroom. Parents may not understand concepts like invented spelling, thematic teaching, and cooperative learning, and may blame these unfamiliar strategies for their child's lack of success. Here are other ways to include parents:

- Communicate with parents through communication logs, diaries, journals, newsletters, and e-mail.
- Most importantly, encourage parents to attend all team meetings called to discuss accommodations and supports implemented for their child in the classroom.

Be aware that many parents with struggling learners have been through numerous bouts of testing and evaluation of their children, sometimes with conflicting results, and many learning strategies may have been tried unsuccessfully. Parents will often come to you exhausted, confused, and frustrated at their inability to find answers for their child. They need to be treated with patience, respect, and kindness, and assure them you're going to hang in there with them and their child.

What happens when a child moves? I have worked so hard to develop adaptations for children, and I'm afraid the new teacher won't.

One thing we can do is document all the adaptations and accommodations we have provided for the child, and include all specific adaptations and accommodation sheets we have used. Also send along a copy of any behavior management plan developed for the child. Make sure you let the new school's administrator know that you will be willing to communicate personally with the new teacher and specialists in order to give them an understanding of how to help the child.

My principal expects all students to be "on level" at the end of the school year. How can I inform her of the improbability of this happening?

First of all, you need to ask for a definition of "on level." Does this mean that all children exiting from a single-year first grade will be reading materials designed for "end-of-year" first grade? This is not only unlikely, it is virtually impossible.

If your principal thinks this is possible, you have a problem. You need to share information with the principal on your own periodic assessments of the students, showing when the students were academically at the beginning of the year compared to where they are at the end of the year. Being able to show the students' progress throughout the year will help, and will (one hopes) give the principal an inkling of the normal variations in academic development among students.

Of course, this means you have to have your own assessment act together. Make sure you have plenty of work samples contained in your student portfolios that accurately show your students' progression in skills. In terms of your struggling learners, you will be able to show growth on a continuum even though it may not be a specific grade level. You can also periodically audio and videotape children working and reading in the classroom to show growth.

Invite your principal into your classroom to participate in book sharing with the students; have her observe the students as they work in learning centers, and as you apply a variety of adaptations throughout the classroom. Give your principal the opportunity to interact on a personal level with your struggling students so that she can gain an understanding of how these children function.

What kind of training do I need to motivate and teach struggling learners?

Teachers should training to enable them to do the following:

- Combine literature based reading and writing instruction with more structured methods. Struggling learners need structure, but do not react well to isolated drills. Integrated structured lessons in phonics and other decoding skills with exciting children's literature will provide both the structure and the motivation these learners need.
- Teachers need to understand how to adapt instruction for children who learn differently. For instance, when learning the concept of addition, some students will be able to add the numbers mentally without use of manipulatives, some may place objects next to the numbers and count them, and others will regroup the numbers. The teacher needs to be able to teach these different approaches as appropriate for a particular student.
- Develop adaptations and accommodations in classroom instruction and assignments appropriate to the students needs.
- Create student centered classrooms in which instruction is geared toward the students' ability levels and needs, rather than providing a ready made curriculum and fitting the students into the curriculum. Develop a method by which students can have input into the curriculum and the classroom's rules of conduct.
- Create learning centers as part of the classroom environment.
- Develop cooperative learning opportunities.
- Develop an assessment program using portfolios and work samples.
- Adjust the pace and presentation of subject matter according to varying needs of the children in the class.

- Develop collaborative teaching and planning strategies to provide support for each other as teachers.
- Apply constructivist learning and brain-based learning concepts to instruction, emphasizing learning as a process rather than a product.
- Design lessons to begin with concrete activities and then move to abstract concepts.

How can I get support for myself within the school setting?

Some year's ago, a teacher's only option in getting support was to refer the struggling learner to a child study team, which essentially meant the team would test the child.

Instead of sending the child down the hall to be tested, many schools are setting up strong building based assistance teams which provide instructional support for the teacher. Teachers meet periodically with their peers in their own school to brainstorm suitable instructional adaptations for students. This has the advantage of being able to tap into ideas that other teachers have discovered in working with similar problems, and can have the side benefit of an increased comfort level when it becomes time to send a child on to his or her next teacher. Imagine being able to pass this child along to a teacher who has sat next to you for the past year in an assistance team meeting and helped you work out your instructional strategies for this child!

Having a strong, assistance-based team also provides a sense of community for teachers, a message of "We're all in this together," rather than "You're on your own." This sense of community can also be very reassuring to parents and their children.