SLOW LEARNERS: A GUIDE TO ACADEMIC INTERVENTIONS FOR PARENTS

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The term slow learner has traditionally been used for children and youth who obtain scores of 70–85 (below the average range) on individually administered intelligence tests. Rather than define this group based on intelligence test scores, it is more useful to define slow learners as those students for whom learning is more difficult than for typical peers and also for whom the usual disability services are neither available nor considered necessary.

Slow Learner Characteristics
Approximately 14% of all students across the country are slow learners. These students typically experience ongoing academic difficulties in several areas, but they rarely are considered disabled. Many slow learners do quite well learning basic skills, but they have considerable difficulty as school work and task demands become increasingly complex and abstract. They learn best when they can see and touch concrete examples of the concepts being presented but struggle to apply their knowledge in new and varied situations.

Not surprisingly, school for slow learners often becomes a prolonged exercise in frustration, futility, and failure with far reaching social-emotional and behavioral consequences. Slow learners comprise a disproportionate number of high school dropouts and experience higher rates of mental health problems than students of average intelligence. Yet, this remains an under-identified and underserved group of students.

Rationale for Parent Involvement in Educating Slow Learners
One of the more frustrating situations for parents and teachers occurs when a child’s academic performance is below grade level and he or she fails to respond to regular education interventions in the classroom. Rather than making the desired progress and catching up to peers, it becomes increasingly apparent that the child is so far behind academically he or she is unlikely ever to catch up. This is a common educational scenario that often leads to a special education referral and evaluation. When a child in this situation subsequently qualifies for special education services, parents and teachers feel relieved because they have an explanation as to why the child has been struggling. In addition, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is designed specifically to meet that child’s educational needs, and special education eligibility guarantees specific due process rights and procedures.

Ineligible for Special Education
In contrast to the situation described above, slow learners rarely qualify for special education services. Owing to administrative definitions of special education categories, only a small number of slow learners—usually those with intelligence scores at either end of the 70–85 range or those who exhibit other severe problems such as behavior difficulties—are likely to be considered eligible for special education services. Some of the slow learners with higher intelligence test scores may qualify with a "specific learning disability," and in some states students who obtain scores in the 70–75 range may be considered eligible with "mild mental retardation." In most cases, however, slow learners are not going to receive special education services because they ironically score too high on intelligence tests to permit an educational diagnosis of "mild mental retardation" and too low to have a "learning disability." Parents and educators should note that some types of disability—learning disabilities and behavior disorders in particular—preclude or make it very difficult to obtain accurate and valid information on these tests, sometimes resulting in denying a truly disabled student appropriate services.
Need for Collaboration

Frustration. Depending upon how parents and teachers respond, the fact that most slow learners do not qualify for special education is not necessarily a bad thing. Unfortunately, this outcome often leaves parents, teachers, and the child with unanswered questions, feelings of helplessness, and a lack of direction regarding programming. The resulting uncertainty strains the home-school relationship, leads to blaming the child for being “lazy,” “unmotivated,” or “immature,” and significantly increases the probability that the child will be retained in a grade. In the end, the child’s academic skills are perceived to be inadequate to support grade-level work, and the child subsequently thinks of himself or herself as being dumb or stupid.

Need for help at school and at home. As parents and teachers struggle to find solutions for the unique and challenging difficulties associated with educating a slow learner, they may begin to blame one another for the child’s difficulties. As a result, the majority of slow learners are left to succeed or fail on their own with varying degrees of educational accommodations in school and additional help at home. It is for these reasons that a team approach with shared responsibilities for promoting student success becomes an essential component in the education of slow learners. Despite the absence of federal mandates for formal accommodations and special education due process procedures, slow learners still require various accommodations in the classroom. In addition, perhaps more so than any other students in school, slow learners also need their parents’ help at home to reinforce and build upon the learning that occurs at school. Just as it takes longer to walk a mile than it does to run, slow learners require more instructional time and opportunities to practice their academic skills.

Working With Children and Youth at Home

The following suggestions are offered to assist parents in the process of supplementing a slow learner’s education at home. The ideas offered here include some general guidelines and a few selected examples of academic interventions that can be used at home to develop and strengthen basic skills. Additional information, including subject-specific remedial materials and activities for children and youth of all ages and grade levels, can be obtained from the accompanying list of resources at the end of this handout.

- Children and youth value time spent with parents more than most parents realize, even if it involves something as simple as doing school work together.
- Parents can exert a powerful influence on their children’s behavior by modeling reading, writing, and other lifelong learning behaviors on a regular basis. Make sure your child sees you reading and writing.
- Children who have stories read to them at an early age grow up to be better readers. Similarly, children of parents who read frequently become better readers than children of parents who rarely read.
- Develop a consistent routine with a specific time and place for doing homework and school-related learning activities and stick to it. Think in terms of study habits more so than study skills. As with any learned skills, practice makes perfect.
- Encourage recreational reading by scheduling regular visits to the local library, and do not forget to check out books for yourself.
- Commit to developing and maintaining strong home-school relationships and lines of communication with teachers and other school personnel. Resist the temptation to play the blame game. Be a problem solver, not a problem finder (or worse, a part of the problem).
- Avoid power struggles and limit frustration by working in short, 10-20-minute sessions at a time. Younger children typically have shorter attention spans and require more frequent breaks than an older child. In any event, keep a fast pace, have fun, and always end on a positive note.

Academic Interventions for Slow Learners

Work closely with the classroom teachers to know what areas to work on at home. Use the chart of skill hierarchies in the Appendix at the end of the handout to help identify strengths and areas of difficulty. Specific strategies include:

- Consistently utilize speed-reading drills of high-frequency words from the Fry Instant Word List or Dolche List, repeated readings of passages, timed tests of math facts, and time-limited writing samples on a daily basis to improve fluency. After each error, provide the correct response and have your child point to and repeat the correct response before moving on. Make a list of all missed items for later use with flashcards. It is essential for these basic skills to be as complete and automatic as possible.
- Use the lists of items missed during oral reading, timed math tests, and spelling exercises to create flashcards. Mix in a few of the known items as well to help build confidence and present the flashcards rapidly. Provide corrective feedback for any errors,
and have your child repeat the correct response twice before going to the next item. Sort the cards into two piles: correct and incorrect. Repeat this process and provide corrective feedback with increased speed of presentation until all words are correct.

- Use a repeated readings approach. Using a stopwatch, time how long it takes to read a passage. Provide immediate feedback for missed words with your child pointing to and repeating the correct response. Keep a chart of elapsed time. Repeat these procedures each day with the same passage until 100% accuracy is achieved and completion time stops decreasing for three consecutive days. Consult with the teacher for help in selecting another passage at your child’s instructional level (where your child can, for instance, correctly pronounce 90–95% of the words) and repeat the process.

- Rote memorization works well for achieving mastery of basic skills, but it is necessary to provide multiple real-life examples when working on more advanced concepts. Encourage discussion of similarities and differences among concepts and examples to strengthen understanding and ability to apply the skills to new situations.

- Use a tape recorder to show the connection between spoken and written words. Have your child dictate a story or written assignment into a tape recorder. Encourage your child to think out loud and use whatever words come to mind. Afterward, your child can use a dictionary as needed when transcribing the tape. Provide ongoing feedback and instruction regarding proper capitalization and punctuation, sentence structure, and paragraph formation.

**Resources**


**Websites**

ABC Teach—www.abcteach.com

Family Village: A global community of disability-related resources—www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/index.html

Fry Word List—

www.usu.edu/teachall/text/reading/Frylist.pdf

The Gram: The Learning Disabilities Association of California’s (LDA-CA) quarterly newsletter—

www.ldaca.org/gram

Kidsource Online—

www.kidsource.com/education/homework/calendar.html

LD Online—www.ldonline.org

The Learning Toolbox—

http://coe.jmu.edu/LearningToolbox/index.html

Literacy Connections—

www.literacyconnections.com/index.html

School Express—www.schoolexpress.com

Teacher2Teacher—http://mathforum.org/t2t

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Appendix: Skill Hierarchies

Levels 1, 2, and 3 constitute basic fundamental skills. Levels 4 and 5 represent higher level skills. Each successive level builds upon the levels below it. Strive for mastery (100% correct) of level 1 before proceeding to level 2, mastery of level 2 before level 3, and so on. It is common for children to be at different levels in reading, mathematics, and writing, so do not be surprised if your child is working on level 4 Reading (reading fluency) and level 2 Mathematics (computing basic math facts). Just be sure that your child has mastered the skills of a given level within a subject area before proceeding to more complex skills in that area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Mathematics</th>
<th>Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Passage comprehension</td>
<td>Application/word problems</td>
<td>Paragraphs and essays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Reading fluency</td>
<td>Estimation</td>
<td>Sentence structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Sight word recognition</td>
<td>Measurement (time, money)</td>
<td>Capitalization/punctuation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Word attack skills</td>
<td>Computing basic math facts</td>
<td>Spelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Letter identification</td>
<td>Numbers and counting</td>
<td>Letter formation</td>
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