

As a teacher of students who were struggling to learn I had one question.

Why do some children learn more easily than others?

I knew that it had nothing to do with a child's intelligence because some of the slow learners I worked with were very bright - just not 'school bright'. By 'school bright' I mean able to learn the way schools wanted them to.

It took training, research and asked endless questions and eventually I found my answer.

Children who learn more easily than others have the skills that lead to learning. They know how to learn!

The students who were struggling to learn did not have all the skills they needed. They did not have the vital foundational skills that make learning possible.

So what are these skills? And how can we make sure children develop them?

When you look up 'learning skills' you get a host of different ideas and few of them relate to how children learn in school. I took all these ideas as well as those I had been taught to diagnose in class and regrouped them into a more manageable system – one based on over 35 years as a classroom teacher, my diagnostic training and experiences and the latest research into how children learn.

Here is the result!

A good learner has developed every one of the following skills and knows how to use them. It is a simple list but it is effective. I have used this knowledge and skill categorization to help hundreds of parents unlock their child's genius and children overcome learning hurdles.

Don't be confused by how simple they are. They are the basis of all learning and when you know what they are you can look at your child's learning issues in a new way, a way that leads to learning.

## **The Porter Skills List©**

These foundational learning skills come in three categories.

There are -

- **physical learning skills** – the skills that enable student learning –they are pretty obvious when you think about it but they can get overlooked with disastrous results.
- **emotional learning skills** – these are attitudes children need that get them ready to learn. Without the right attitude to learning children never even try to do their work
- **cognitive learning skills** – these are the skills children need to get their work done. They are school based skills, specific to learning in class.

Let's take a closer look

### 1. Physical skills – The ABLE to learn skills

There are four physical attributes children need. These attributes give children the physical ability they need to learn. They seem obvious but they are often overlooked and can cause learning difficulties. Fortunately, once discovered they are easy to correct. A visit to a professional or small changes in lifestyle are often all that is needed.

#### **Vision**

Children need to be able to see clearly. Any disturbance in their visual ability becomes a learning hurdle. These 'disturbances' may be caused by astigmatism, myopia, long sightedness or dry eyes.

Yearly checks by an optometrist are recommended.

#### **Hearing**

This is a tricky issue and has been the cause of many learning issues. Lack of hearing is a 'hidden' disability. The child with a hearing issue may not know this is the cause of their problems.

There are two kinds of hearing loss. One is a general hearing loss that can be corrected using hearing aids. The other is intermittent hearing loss which is much more insidious. When children have colds their ears get blocked and they cannot hear well. They miss much of what is being said in class. When the cold goes away their hearing is back to normal but they may never catch up with the learning they have missed.

His mother is delighted and he is doing well in the high school of his choice.

Yearly check-ups from a hearing specialist are advised.

#### **Movement**

There are two kinds of movement – gross movement that uses the big muscles of the body and allows a child to walk run and jump and fine movement that uses smaller muscles and allows a child to hold a pencil and do a puzzle.

These skills of movement are developmental but if their development is delayed children are often labelled as clumsy or uncoordinated and their work can be affected. Children with major movement issues – such as those in wheelchairs- - have extra limitations on their ability to learn. Children with minor movement issues may not produce work that looks good or get chosen for the class sports team!

## **Energy**

Learning takes energy! The brain needs energy to function well. Children get energy in two ways – food and sleep.

When a child is hungry his or her brain reverts to using their ‘primal brain’, the part of the brain that works on getting basic human needs met. There is no energy left for the ‘thinking’ part of their brain.

Please make sure your child has a nutritious breakfast. Cereal and milk is fine. It may be a good idea to get the food out the night before as mornings can be rushed. Teenagers may skip breakfast because they are still sleepy (teenagers never really wake up till later in the morning. We shouldn’t be asking them to go to school before 10 a.m.). Having cereal and milk at the ready helps them avoid doing this.

Your child’s brain needs sleep. When your child is asleep his or her brain is busy. It is sorting out the events of the day and putting useless information in the garbage. Useful information gets sent to memory for use later!

How long does this process take? A minimum of eight hours. Younger children need more sleep to help regulate their brain and renew their energy.

How much seep does your child get each night? Is he or she getting enough sleep to be ready to learn the next day?

## **2. The emotional learning skills - The READY to learn skills**

Children may be able to learn, they may have the physical skills they need, but re they ready to learn? Do they have the right attitudes and ways of thinking that make them open to learning? Or does their attitude to learning get in the way of their success?

Here are the four attitudes children need to be ready to learn.

**Good feelings about themselves** and their ability to learn.

Children need to know that they can learn. They need self-confidence in their learning abilities. When a child struggles to learn or undergoes repeated failure in school their confidence in their abilities gets smaller and smaller until they think they cannot learn and don't even try.

Without confidence in their abilities, the confidence to keep trying despite failures, children very quickly give up and stop learning. About half of my time teaching children was spent boosting their self-confidence. Until they felt good about themselves there was no point trying to teach them.

Parents know when their child starts to lose confidence in their abilities. Talk to your child about what is happening and why. Then take steps to change the situation.

**Good feelings about others** and sharing knowledge

Going to school is a social activity. Social activities require sharing and taking responsibility for your actions. A child who is open to sharing what he has learned and who is responsible for getting work done is much more able to benefit from classroom teaching than a child who does not have these skills.

Children often learn in groups and they certainly learn from each other. A child who is not social, who does not feel like sharing and taking responsibility for their own actions misses out on these learning opportunities.

You want your child to be sociable, to have friends, to enjoy the company of others. If your child is having difficulty with this, you need to know why.

Your child may be shy and unwilling to share with others or aggressive and unwilling to take responsibility for his or her actions.

Whatever the situation you need to help your child have a good attitude about working and learning within the classroom situation.

**Good feelings about their work** and what they are learning

Children have little control over what they are taught in school. Much of what they are expected to learn seems to have little or no relevance to their lives. They

wonder why they have to learn all the things they are taught and why they should put effort into seemingly irrelevant topics.

Children need to know that their efforts are going to yield results. Often the result they want is a good report card or a good mark on an exam but sometimes that is not enough to make them feel happy about their work. Then learning becomes a slog and the child is unhappy and possibly resentful.

Children need to know why they have to do the work they are given. Many young students have no idea why they go to school. Make sure your child understands why school is important and that learning sometimes seemingly irrelevant facts and subjects leads to a better outcome in life.

### **Good feelings about the future** and what they can achieve in life

No one knows what the future will look like. Children need to be optimistic. They need to know that their future could include a family, a job they love, and enough money to cover their needs. Without hope for the future there is no point in trying to get there. There is no point in doing school work because it won't make any difference what the child does if he or she thinks the future is out of their control.

Students who are sad or depressed do not have good feelings about the future. They are too wrapped up with their own concerns to look forward.

Curiosity is a good approach to thinking about the future. A child who is curious and asks questions is imagining what the future might look like and knowing what opportunities await gives a child some sense of control and optimism.

The best way to help your child feel good about the future is to model optimism and curiosity. If your child sees you being optimistic and curious, he will want to follow your lead.

### **3. The cognitive learning skills – the PREPARED to learn skills**

When a child has the physical and emotional learning skills he or she is almost prepared to learn in class. Learning is a process and children need to be able to follow the process to get to a result. In order to follow the process of learning children need the following four skills.

**Attention** – the ability to focus on what matters for the amount of time it matters

Children who cannot pay attention or who have a short attention span never even get to first base! Attention is a skill that needs developing and using wisely. There are several types of attention; selective, sustained, alternating, divided, and children need to be able to use them all.

One way of helping your child learn this skill is by redirecting his or her attention when you notice it straying.

**Understanding** – the ability to understand what they have paid attention to  
Then comes the skill of understanding. Children need to use visual and aural perception skills to make sense of what they have seen.

You can help your child makes sense of what he or she sees and hears by asking him or her to describe the experience. What did you see? What did you hear? This is also a way of helping your child develop the skill of attention.

**Processing** – the ability to process the information and make it their own  
When your child has paid attention and understood what he or she has seen and heard the next step in the learning process is to process that information. This is normally called ‘thinking’. This thinking process takes place when new information is added and compared to what a child already knows. It is a way to push knowledge forward.

For this to happen children need to have access to their memories. You can help by asking your child if they remember another situation like this and how they handled it. Asking any of the five ‘W’ questions is also a good way of promoting thinking skills.

**Production** – the ability to show others what they have learned  
This skill is often overlooked in school. Teachers are not good at letting students know what a finished piece of work should look like. If a student does not produce work that looks good, that answer the right questions, that is well organized and easy to understand their marks will be low.

This level of production takes time and effort. Don’t expect your child to produce perfectly produced work all the time. Decide which work needs this effort and concentrate on that.

These twelve skills will lead your child to learning, will help him or her reach their full potential and succeed in school. If children are missing, or not using, one or more of these skills they will struggle to be all that they can be.

The reason your bright child underachieves may be that he or she lacks one or more of these skills and all that is required for him or her to flourish and grow is to discover which skill needs developing and provide the support that helps your child develop it!