Frustration, Anxiety, Tension
THE F.A.T. CITY LEARNING DISABILITY WORKSHOP

INTRODUCTION

THE F.A.T. CITY LEARNING DISABILITY WORKSHOP is a program which allows the viewer to spend 70 minutes experiencing life the way a learning disabled student does. Working with parents, teachers, and friends of learning disabled children at an all day workshop, the program host and workshop facilitator, Richard Lavoie, demonstrates the frustration, anger, and tension that learning disabled or LD children typically experience in a classroom. During the program, adults are asked questions, given material to read, and made to do exercises which have been specially fashioned to simulate the LD child’s experience. They come away from the program determined to alter the way they interact and respond to the learning disabled children in their environments.

The purpose of this videotape and discussion guide is to sensitize parents, teachers, counselors, and friends of learning disabled students to the world of the LD student and to educate them towards different modes of interaction with the students. This video/print package provides an ideal tool for small and large groups to begin to explore the issues surrounding the LD child and can also help users develop personal skills for effective interaction with these students. The guide provides suggestions about how to use the videotape with groups and gives suggested group exercises and discussion questions. A list of resources is also included.

Included in this guide are the following aids:

- A definition of learning disabilities and ways to recognize the learning disabled student;
- A brief description of the program themes;
- Helpful suggestions for parents of LD children;
- Helpful hints for teachers who have LD students in their classes;
- Tips for preparing and managing group discussion;
- Suggested steps to follow in group discussion.

WHAT IS A LEARNING DISABILITY?

Interestingly, there is no clear and widely accepted definition of “learning disabilities.” Because of the multidisciplinary nature of the field, there is ongoing debate on the issue of definition, and there are currently at least twelve definitions that appear in the professional literature.

These disparate definitions do agree on certain factors:

1. The learning disabled have difficulties with academic achievement and progress; discrepancies exist between a person’s potential for learning and what he actually learns.

2. The learning disabled show an uneven pattern of development (language development, physical development, academic development).

3. Learning problems are not due to environmental disadvantage.

4. Learning problems are not due to mental retardation or emotional disturbance.

Most professionals utilize a “definition of exclusion” when defining an LD population. That is, the learning disabled child is one who is not functioning in school despite the fact that the child is: a) not mentally retarded, b) not emotionally disturbed, c) not impaired in his modalities (e.g. blind, deaf), and d) has had an opportunity to learn not hindered by excessive absences, poor teaching, frequent family moves, etc.

The term “learning disability” was coined by Dr. Samuel Kirk in 1962. It is often referred to as the “hidden handicap” because there is no outward appearance of the disability — children with learning disabilities appear to be no different than their normal peers.

HOW PREVALENT ARE LEARNING DISABILITIES?

Experts estimate that six to ten percent of the school-aged population in the United States is learning disabled. Nearly forty percent of the children enrolled in the nation’s special education classes suffer from a learning disability.

The Foundation for Children With Learning Disabilities estimates that there are six million adults with learning disabilities as well. A network of services and support is now being formed to assist these people with employment and social difficulties.
WHAT CAUSES LEARNING DISABILITIES?

Little is currently known about the causes of learning disabilities. However, some general observations can be made:

* Some children develop and mature at a slower rate than others in the same age group. As a result, they may or may not be able to do the expected school work. This kind of learning disability is called "maturational lag."

* Some children with normal vision and hearing may interpret everyday sights and sounds because of some unexplained disorder of the nervous system.

* Injuries before birth or in early childhood probably account for some later learning problems.

* Children born prematurely and children who had medical problems soon after birth sometimes have learning disabilities.

* Learning disabilities tend to run in families, so some learning disabilities may be inherited.

* Learning disabilities are more common in boys than girls, possibly because boys tend to mature more slowly.

* Some learning disabilities appear to be linked to the irregular spelling, pronunciation, and structure of the English language. The incidence of learning disabilities is lower in Spanish- or Italian-speaking countries.

WHAT ARE THE "EARLY WARNING SIGNS" OF LEARNING DISABILITIES?

Children with learning disabilities exhibit a wide range of symptoms. These include problems with reading, mathematics, comprehension, writing, spoken language, or reasoning abilities. Hyperactivity, inattention and perceptual coordination may also be associated with learning disabilities but are not learning disabilities themselves. The primary characteristic of a learning disability is a significant difference between a child’s achievement in some areas and his or her overall intelligence.

Learning disabilities typically affect five general areas:

1. Spoken language: delays, disorders, and deviations in listening and speaking
2. Written language: difficulties with reading, writing, and spelling
3. Arithmetic: difficulty in performing arithmetic operations or in understanding basic concepts
4. Reasoning: difficulty in organizing and integrating thoughts
5. Memory: difficulty in remembering information and instructions

Among the symptoms commonly related to learning disabilities are:

* poor performance on group tests
* difficulty discriminating size, shape, color
* difficulty with temporal (time) concepts
* distorted concept of body image
* reversals in writing and reading
* general awkwardness
* poor visual-motor coordination
* hyperactivity
* difficulty copying accurately from a model
* slowness in completing work
* poor organizational skills
* easily confused by instructions
* difficulty with abstract reasoning and/or problem-solving
* disorganized thinking
* often obsessed on one topic or idea
* poor short-term or long-term memory
* impulsive behavior; lack of reflective thought prior to action
* low tolerance for frustration
* excessive movement during sleep
* poor peer relationships
* overly excitable during group play
* poor social judgment
* inappropriate, unselective, and often excessive display of affection
* lags in development milestones (e.g. motor, language)
* behavior often inappropriate for situation
* failure to see consequences for his actions
* overly gullible; easily led by peers
* excessive variation in mood and responsiveness
* poor adjustment to environmental changes
* overly distractible; difficulty concentrating
* difficulty making decisions
* lack of hand preference or mixed dominance
* difficulty with tasks requiring sequencing

When considering these symptoms, it is important to remain mindful of the following:

1. No one will have all these symptoms.
2. Among LD populations, some symptoms are more common than others.
3. All people have at least two or three of these problems to some degree.
4. The number of symptoms seen in a particular child does not give an indication as to whether the disability is mild or severe. It is important to consider if the behaviors are chronic and appear in clusters.
PROGRAM THEMES

"THE F.A.T. CITY LEARNING DISABILITY WORKSHOP," program host and workshop facilitator Richard D. Lavoie assembles special education teachers, psychologists, parents, siblings and teachers of learning disabled children in an experiential workshop that is structured around the following themes:

**perceiving Frustration, Anxiety and Tension**

Children experience these feelings when teachers:

- Use throwaway sarcasms which may make the rest of the class laugh but create a victim out of the LD child;
- Move through question and answer periods so rapidly that LD children cannot keep up and choose not to volunteer, or when called on, cannot answer;
- Become intimidating, and demand that LD students "Look at them" when they speak to them.

They may be dyslexic or they may not have a grasp of the background information required to understand what they are reading.

**The Effect of Visual Perception on Behavior**

Often the LD child gets into trouble and does not know what he or she did wrong. Misperceptions of visual stimuli can lead the LD student to give incorrect answers or respond inappropriately to situations.

**ability to Process Language**

Children's inability to process language as rapidly as hers may make it necessary for teachers to:

- Move less rapidly through classroom discussion, especially the question and answer periods;
- Take the LD child aside and promise only to call on him or her when standing in front of the student's desk. That way, only the teacher and LD student know when the student is required to answer.

**Risk-Taking**

Sometimes intimidating situations in the classroom make LD students hesitant to take risks. This leads to:

- Lack of participation in classroom discussion for fear of giving a wrong answer which will be ridiculed;
- LD students developing into LD adults who are reluctant to take chances.

**Visual Perception**

The visual perception problems of LD students make it difficult for them to immediately understand what they are looking at. This problem is exacerbated by teachers who:

- Urge the LD student to "try harder" to understand what he or she is having trouble making sense of;
- Attempt to "bribe" such students by offering them an early recess or less homework, etc.
- Attempt to threaten the student by withdrawing such things as recess, etc.
- Engage in "blaming the victim" by accusing the LD child of not trying hard enough.

They may be dyslexic or they may not have a grasp of the background information required to understand what they are reading.

**Auditory and Visual Capabilities**

LD students often need to hear a written passage before they are able to comprehend it. Many LD students benefit from having books on audiotape.

**Fairness**

Teachers are urged to re-examine the notion of what is "fair." "Fair" does not mean that every child gets the same treatment, but that every child gets what he or she needs.

LD students are often dyslexic and they cannot decode information as quickly as others can.

**Commentary**

The workshop participants reflect on the feelings they experienced during the session. Comments range from "devastated" to "frustrating" and "got a headache." Parents of LD children stress that students should be encouraged to concentrate on tasks that show what they can do instead of what they can't do.
FOR PARENTS OF LEARNING DISABLED CHILDREN

What should a parent do if it is suspected that a child has a learning disability?

The parent should contact the child's school and arrange for testing and evaluation. Federal law requires that public school districts provide special education and related services to children who need them. If these tests indicate that the child requires special educational services, the school evaluation team will meet to develop an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) geared to the child's needs. The IEP describes in detail an educational plan designed to remediate and compensate for the child's difficulties.

Simultaneously, the parent should take the child to the family pediatrician for a complete physical examination. The child should be examined for correctable problems (e.g. poor vision or hearing loss) that may cause difficulty in school.

How does a learning disability affect the parents of the child?

Research indicates that parental reaction to the diagnosis of learning disability is more pronounced than in any other area of exceptionality. Consider: If a child is severely retarded or physically handicapped, the parent becomes aware of the problem in the first few weeks of the child's life. However, the pre-school development of the learning disabled child is often uneventful and the parent does not suspect that a problem exists until it is diagnosed in school.

When informed of the problem by elementary school personnel, a parent's first reaction is generally to deny the existence of a disability. This denial is, of course, unproductive. The father tends to remain in this stage for a prolonged period, because he is not exposed to the child's day-to-day frustrations and failures.

Research conducted by Eleanor Westhead suggests that the parent of an LD child goes through a series of emotions before truly accepting the child and his problem. These "stages" are totally unpredictable; a parent may move from stage-to-stage in random order. Some parents skip over stages; others remain in one stage for an extended period. These stages are as follows:

- **DENIAL:** "There is really nothing wrong!" "That's the way I was as a child — not to worry!"
- **BLAME:** "You baby him!" "You expect too much of him." "It's not from my side of the family."
- **FEAR:** "Maybe they're not telling me the real problem!" "Is it worse than they say?" "Will he ever marry? Go to college? Graduate?"
- **ENVY:** "Why can't he be like his sister or his cousins?"
- **MOURNING:** "He could have been such a success, if not for the learning disability!"
- **BARGAINING:** "Wait 'til next year." "Maybe the problem will improve if we move! (or he goes to camp, etc.)."
- **ANGER:** "The teachers don't know anything." "I hate this neighborhood ... this school ... this teacher."
- **GUILT:** "My mother was right; I should have used cloth diapers when he was a baby." "I shouldn't have worked during his first year." "I am being punished for something and my child is suffering as a result."
- **ISOLATION:** "Nobody else knows or cares about my child." "You and I against the world. No one else understands."
- **FLIGHT:** "Let's try this new therapy — Donahue says it works!" "We are going to go from clinic to clinic until somebody tells me what I want to hear!"
Again, the pattern of these reactions is totally unpredictable. This situation is worsened by the fact that frequently the mother and father may be involved in different and conflicting stages at the same time (e.g. blame vs. denial; anger vs. guilt). This can make communication very difficult.

What can a parent do at home to foster independence and success for the learning disabled child?

* Rules and limits should be clearly outlined and parents should adhere closely to these regulations.

* All members of the family should help create a support system for the LD child. He should also be required to develop skills in self-advocacy.

* Foster a non-competitive environment at home. The LD child must learn to celebrate his own small victories. He should learn to view his progress as compared to his previous performance, not the performance of others.

* Praise and reinforcement of positive behavior will encourage the child to repeat that behavior.

* Attention span tends to lengthen when tasks are short and successful.

* When a child is entering a new situation (e.g. joining boy scouts, enrolling for religious instruction), the parent has two jobs to do: 1. preparing the child for the situation (e.g., discuss, role play, etc.) and 2. preparing the situation for the child (if appropriate, discuss the child's needs and limitations with the coach, teacher, or adult leader).

* Remember that the child is more normal than different. Emphasize his strengths and his abilities.

* Never forget that the LD child needs what all children need: love, acceptance, protection, discipline, and the freedom to grow and learn.
FOR TEACHERS OF LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS

In 1975 the federal government passed Public Law 94-142 which ensures that each American child will receive a "free, public and appropriate" education and will spend the maximum amount of time possible in the regular classroom. As a result of this mainstreaming movement, every teacher in the country is charged with the responsibility of providing educational services to children with special educational needs. Here are some techniques to help teachers make mainstreaming a more successful experience for learning disabled children and their classmates.

Positive Behavior

Oftentimes, the mainstream teacher finds it necessary to use specialized techniques to monitor and modify the classroom behavior of learning disabled students. The impulsivity and distractibility inherent in learning disabilities often results in disruptive classroom behaviors. The following techniques are designed to improve the behavior of mainstreamed students and provide them with the structure and support they need to maintain positive behaviors.

* Many children with learning disabilities have difficulty making transitions from one activity to another. This is particularly true when a child is going from an enjoyable activity (e.g. a game) to a less enjoyable one (e.g. math). In order to ensure a smoother transition, be certain to "wind down" the enjoyable activity by providing a warning signal five minutes before the game must end. As each minute passes, inform the child of how many minutes are left before the game will be over.

* When a child resists new tasks assign some very small portion of the new task (e.g. one simple subtraction problem) which must be completed before the child goes on to an old, familiar task (e.g. several addition problems). Gradually increase the ratio between new tasks and familiar tasks.

* Many learning disabled children are reluctant to participate in group activities. If a child responds well in the presence of one other pupil, plan activities in which he has ample opportunity to do so. Then add a second peer to the group, later a third, and so on, until the group approximates the entire class.

* When the child appears to be "spacing out" do not rudely call for his attention. Rather, call his attention to something (i.e. "Danny, look at that bird sitting on the window ledge").

* Labeling is disabling! Label the behavior, not the person. "It is irresponsible to be late for class." is preferable to "You are irresponsible."

* When correcting a child’s behavior, try the four step model designed by Haim Ginott:

  a. Recognize and acknowledge the child’s wish.
  b. State the limit calmly and clearly.
  c. Point out way(s) that his wish may be partially fulfilled.
  d. Help the child express the resentment that arises when limits are imposed. The resulting discussion sounds like this:

  "Adam, I know that you would like to play with your toy car now (a). But the rule in this class is ‘no toys during reading’ and your classmates are disrupted by your behavior (b). You will be able to play with the car at recess and lunch (c). I know you don’t like that rule, but I must insist that you follow it (d)."

* Some distractible children have the habit of doodling on their desks while listening to a class lecture or discussion. This may help them pay attention to the task at hand. Allow that student to cover his desk with butcher paper and allow this constructive doodling.

* If your class activity is getting too loud and you want things to quiet down, tell all the children to close their eyes. This quiets them down instantly.

* Always focus upon participation, enjoyment, contribution and satisfaction in competitive games and activities. Emphasis should be on skill and strategy development, not winning or losing.
Classroom Management

Learning Disabled children respond most favorably to an educational environment that is structured, predictable and orderly. The mainstream teacher is well-advised to develop a "bag of tricks" — a collection of techniques to simplify and streamline their classroom activities on a daily basis. These techniques are designed to enable you to run a smooth, predictable class on a day-to-day basis.

* Post the rules for the class. State them positively ("Raise hand and be recognized before you speak" NOT "Don't speak out in class"). Tell them what you WANT THEM TO DO not what you DON'T WANT THEM TO DO.

* When a seatwork task is assigned, set a kitchen timer for one minute. If the entire class has begun the task by the time the timer rings, they receive a group reward (eg. a few minutes extra breaktime).

* When preparing homework, be mindful of the 3 R's of effective homework:

  - RELEVANCE - Assignments should be directly related to the work that you are doing in class.
  - REVIEW - All homework assignments should be review of material previously covered. New or unfamiliar concepts should not be introduced as homework.
  - REALISTIC - It generally takes an LD child three times as long to complete an assignment at home as it would to complete it in the structured classroom setting. Therefore, a 10-minute classroom assignment will take approximately 30 minutes at home. Remember this when preparing homework.

* It is very helpful to maintain a deck of index cards — one card for every child in your class. Use the cards for a variety of purposes including:

  - Calling on children during recitation, evaluations or discussions. Shuffle the cards so they won't know who is next.
  - Making notes on individual needs, homework performance, class behavior, etc. These notes will be invaluable when preparing for parent conferences or for comments on report cards.

* It is helpful to post a monthly calendar in your classroom. Use it to post due dates, birthdays, holidays and any other dates that pertain to your students. You may also want to post projects and objectives on the calendar (e.g. "Measurement Unit begins today," "Begin study of plant cells today," etc.) This provides students with information regarding your long term plans and goals.

* If your LD student is constantly forgetting his books at home, issue him two books. One book stays at home and the other is for school use.

* It is critically important to encourage cooperation (as opposed to competition) in the mainstream classroom. This ensures that the special needs child will be able to participate fully in class and will encourage positive traits of sharing and caring. There are several ways that you can foster and encourage cooperation in your classroom.

  - De-emphasize the importance of scores and winning in competitive games.
    - Combine the points of both teams with the emphasis on getting the highest total score.
    - Don't keep score at all.
    - In games like kickball, all members of one team have their turn before exchanging sides.
  - Emphasize the cooperative aspects of competition.
    - In preparing for contests such as spelling bees, have participants study together prior to the contest.
    - Teach team members to be supportive of each other. Do not tolerate Teammate Bashing.
    - Teach students that competitive activities are actually cooperative ventures among the participants.

* Even the simplest classroom tools (stapler, paper cutter) can cause accidents and injury. Design safety rules for the use of these. Explain these rules and post them in the classroom. You may someday be called upon to prove that you taught the correct student use of these tools.

* The mainstream teacher can use a tape recorder quite effectively to modify the curriculum for the students with special needs. You can tape record directions or instructions for the student who is not able to read effectively. Allow the student to tape record his answers for tests or assignments. The student with writing difficulties may compose his story or report on the tape recorder and then write it by re-playing it in short segments.
d. Do not use more than ten T/F items on any one test.

* When a child misspells a word (e.g. "service" for "service") ask him to pronounce it THE WAY HE SPELLED IT. This will help him identify the error.

* Remember that talking with (or talking to) language impaired children is not equivalent to communicating. Just because a child hears what a teacher says, does not mean that he understands and can carry out the instruction. Ask the student to repeat the instructions in his own words to ensure that he understands.

* Report cards have a positive effect upon student progress if they are encouraged to write "self-improvement plans" after each report card. They should write down areas that they wish to improve (class participation, homework). These objectives are filed and the teacher and student occasionally review the progress toward these goals.

* In order to help children recognize their strengths, ask them to make a list of the things that they do well; ask them to discuss the list with their family and friends.

Adults and the LD Child

The mainstream process not only brings special education students in contact with regular education students, its success also depends upon the effective and positive interaction of parents, teachers and specialists. These techniques are designed to foster constructive interaction among the adults in the child's life.

* Make more effective use of your school support staff. Ask the school nurse if she would do a nutrition lecture for your class. Ask the librarian to do some research for an upcoming unit you are preparing. They may enjoy it, and you will now have more time to work directly with the children.

* Want to be on good terms with your specialists (speech clinician, physical education teacher, home arts instructor)? You have twenty students to help you clean your room and pack up at the end of the school year; the specialist has none. Lend him a student to assist him!

* Parent conferences can be critical to the long-term success for the mainstreamed students. Below are some tips to make parent conferencing more effective.

  - If a conference does not go smoothly, schedule another meeting with the parent. Ask your building administrator to sit in.
  - Do not hesitate to take notes and save them. This is particularly important if issues (e.g., retention, special placement) are discussed.
  - Keep anecdotal records of the student's behavior and progress. Discuss these with parents.
  - Do not compare one child to another.
  - Do not discuss any other child with the parents. (e.g., Parent "My son complains about Bruce a lot. Does Bruce have some kind of problem?" Wise Teacher. "Thank you for that information. I will keep an eye out for this. But of course, you would not want me to discuss Bruce's problems with you, just as you wouldn't want me to discuss your son with Bruce's mom.")
  - Avoid educational jargon. Define any technical terms.
  - Always end the conference on a positive note.
Making Adjustments

To ensure the success of learning disabled mainstream children it is necessary for teachers to modify their curriculum and adjust their academic demands. The following suggestions are designed to assist you as you make these critical adjustments.

* Research indicates that children read more fluently when reading to an audience. Therefore, allowing the "able" reader to read the material aloud to a learning disabled student would be mutually beneficial. Set up a permanent "Buddy Reading System." Match students with similar interests.

* When using the blackboard for instruction, face the students when you speak. Have the material written on the board before you begin offering instruction.

* When offering instructions or directions to learning disabled students be mindful of the following:
  - State commands SPECIFICALLY, using concrete terms (e.g. "Put the box down and pay attention to the lesson." ... not "Do you mind?!?!?").
  - Use specific and consistent vocabulary terms to describe tasks.
  - Give "bite size" directions; avoid a long series of directions.
  - Whenever possible, accompany the explanation with a demonstration.
  - Use cueing words (e.g. "Look up here," "Listen please," etc.) prior to giving directions. Gestures (e.g. raised hand, etc.) are also effective to gain a child's attention.

* Using graph paper for doing arithmetic assignments will enable LD students to keep their digits in the proper columns. Lined composition paper turned vertically has the same benefit.

* In order to give the slower working student credit for accuracy, score a test according to the number correct over the number attempted.

* Print information on one side of the blackboard at a time; walk to the other side and continue. Come back to the first side and erase. Then, start all over. This gives the LD student ample time to copy the information.

* Copying from the blackboard is a very difficult task for many LD children. Assign the LD child a "buddy" and give him a supply of carbon paper. Whenever math problems must be copied from the board, the buddy places a piece of carbon paper between two blank sheets and automatically produces the worksheet for the LD child as he writes his own.

* Teachers often find it difficult to make comments on compositions. As a result, you get into standard cliches like: "nice job," "good writing," etc. Try this: after reading the composition, write a comment similar to what you would say if he told you the story. You will find yourself making comments like, "I had my bike stolen once, too!" or "I had no idea that Abraham Lincoln had such an interesting life."

* There are many techniques that the teacher can utilize in order to assist the learning disabled child in understanding classroom lectures and discussions.
  - Clearly state the purpose and main idea of the lecture at the beginning. This enables the students to listen more attentively and effectively.
  - Give structure to the lecture or discussion by writing an outline of the presentation on the chalkboard. Encourage the students to write down the outline and check off each subheading as it is mentioned.
  - Write down and teach new or technical words.
  - Verbally stress cue words and transitions to aid students in structuring the lecture (e.g. first, next, last).
  - Stress the most important information verbally by using volume (very loud or soft), pitch (high or low), speed (slow) and other inflectional cues.

* True/false test questions are generally viewed as being rather simple. But poorly constructed T/F items can present great difficulty for the child with learning/language problems. Be mindful of the following when designing T/F items:
  a. Avoid stating the question in the negative (e.g. John Kennedy was not a Pulitzer Prize winner).
  b. Avoid tricky items or long, wordy sentences.