

# learning links



Helping Kids Learn

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Information Sheet 47

## New order – how technologies and multimedia can help children with learning difficulties

*This article, by Dr Karen Brooks, Senior Lecturer in the School of Communication at the University of the Sunshine Coast first appeared in the August 2006 edition of Sydney's Child. It is reprinted with the kind permission of both Dr Brooks and Sydney's Child.*

**H**aving spent more years that I care to remember in various classrooms and halls of learning, I am continually astonished by the talented and extraordinary people I meet away from these spheres who eventually reveal to me that while they were at school and/or university they were identified as possessing a 'learning difficulty'.

I'm referring to those diagnosed with 'disorders' (for want of a better word) that directly impact upon their ability to process information in a classroom setting. These can take the form of dyslexia, Asperger's syndrome, aphasia, ADHD, dysgraphia, autism and other learning problems.

Beyond these recognised specific learning difficulties, there are also children without a confirmed disability, who don't respond to the formality of either the classroom or the curriculum, and who exhibit what have been termed antisocial behaviours.

History and our celebrity tabloids are littered with stories of those who overcame 'learning difficulties' and succeeded despite the odds: Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, Richard Branson, Keira Knightley, Orlando Bloom and Tom Cruise, just to name a few.

As an academic and someone who provides professional development for teachers, and talks with parents and their children, I also encounter tales of 'ordinary' students who struggle with what the rest of us take for granted: a formal education.

Regardless of whether or not a child is identified as possessing a specific learning disability or just simply (to borrow the words of an eight-year-old friend of mine) 'hates school', and is basically uncooperative, there is little doubt that our education system is struggling under the weight of trying to provide a balanced curriculum that meets an increasingly diverse range of student needs.

So what is being done to help those with both specific and non-specific learning difficulties? More than most people realise.

Among some of the organisations working to improve educational outcomes for students with a range of learning difficulties are the national group SPELD (Specific Learning Difficulties), and Reverend Bill Crews, who is responsible for the Exodus Foundation in Sydney and has been recognised as a National Living Treasure for his work with homeless kids and with improving literacy and numeracy.

There are also many celebrity figures and sports stars, as well as countless teachers, parents, authors, illustrators, creative artists, allied health professionals and volunteers who work tirelessly in and out of classrooms to aid children with learning difficulties across the spectrum.

EMBRACING THE DREAMS OF FAMILIES FOR THEIR CHILDREN

**Learning Links is a non-profit charity assisting children who have difficulty learning and their families.**

We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

**Early Childhood Services** for children from birth to six years.

- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without special needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood teaching and therapy.

**School Age Services** for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

- Comprehensive assessments.
- Small group tuition and therapy.
- Occupational and speech therapy programs combining specialist education services and therapy.
- Outreach programs.
- The Ronald McDonald Learning Program for seriously ill children and the Reading for Life Program for children falling behind in their reading.

**Family Services** helping and supporting families and health professionals.

- Centre and home-based family counselling.
- Parenting Programs and groups for families.
- Case Management Services.

**Professional Development** for teachers and health professionals.

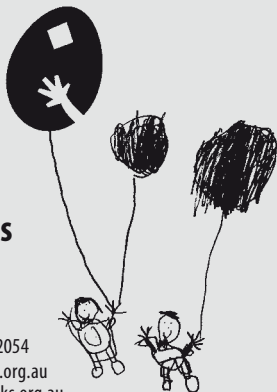
Presentations, workshops and advice on identifying and helping children with learning difficulties, learning disabilities and developmental delays.

**Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Penshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Dee Why and Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, Victoria and New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.**

## Learning Links

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Everything that is being done to recognise, intervene and improve educational outcomes is contingent on government funding and, it seems, a great deal of goodwill and energy.

Yet, despite the time, money and resources being dedicated to identifying kids in need and helping them overcome their learning struggles, according to a recent SPELD NSW survey it isn't enough.

The survey, conducted last year, identified a growing dysjunction between government policies surrounding assistance for those with learning difficulties and what occurs in practice.

Areas of concern related to early identification of children with learning difficulties and subsequent intervention, the understanding of specific needs whether related to a disability or not, insufficient resources and training of teaching staff, and inappropriate use of people with specialist training in schools, especially high schools. These are pretty serious gaps and they appear to be widening.

Furthermore, children who don't meet the criteria for a recognised diagnosis of 'learning difficulties' are often left behind. These can be kids who are classified as 'slow learners' or who are perhaps trying to deal with an untenable family situation and 'act out' at school either by withdrawing or through disruptive behaviour.

These are the kids who, as Angela Weeks, Director of the South Australian branch of SPELD, sadly acknowledges, "fall through the cracks".

As Weeks points out, when you have a large group of children, some with registered difficulties, it's not always easy to accommodate the 'slow learners', the acutely shy or the downright naughty.

Irrespective of the flaws in the system, once a child is identified as having a recognised learning difficulty, either through official diagnosis or a switched-on teacher who actively seeks to understand what is making life (and education) so hard for a particular student, those interested in helping that child generally know where to turn and to whom.

Groups such as SPELD, who hand in hand with committed volunteers, teachers, specialists and parents, are using a range of technologies and multimedia, as well as a holistic and inclusive approach to education, are inspirational – as are their results.

Beginning with the premise that what all children possess are 'learning differences', as opposed to 'difficulties', Angela Weeks and SPELD's software advisor and tutor, and committed volunteer, Jan Polkinghorne, have embraced the role of popular culture and technology in young people's lives and turned it to everyone's educational advantage.

Weeks and Polkinghorne have found that introducing multimedia as an intrinsic part of educational praxis levels the psychological playing field for those with learning difficulties, allowing them to both fit in and contribute in meaningful ways to the knowledge environment of the classroom.

Not everyone, however, is so enthusiastic about what is perceived as a technological and non-essential intrusion into a traditional environment, even if it does help students with learning difficulties.

Polkinghorne doesn't beat around the bush when she says that those attitudes need to shift, and fast.

She puts it succinctly when she states: "We're trying to teach 21<sup>st</sup> century kids using 18<sup>th</sup> century styles. We (the teachers) need to get real."

Weeks concurs. Both women speak from years of experience and from the satisfaction of seeing the positive results of their methods. Drawing on young people's love of the culture they engage with, Polkinghorne and Weeks turn what many parents and teachers consider to be an anathema to education to their students' advantage.

For example, using mobile phones and text messaging to start students expressing ideas for an essay; allowing students to borrow MP3 players and audio books from the library; using video cameras to capture images that are later embedded in stories and projects; encouraging students to express themselves and their ideas in blogs. By prompting students to work with the media and technology they're practically born knowing how to use, education becomes exciting, relevant and, according to Weeks and Polkinghorne, can even help overcome the presence of learning difficulties. That is because ideas and content become paramount when assessing tasks, not the form, which can be oral, visual, written or recorded.

But it's not just those with learning difficulties who benefit from this contemporary and relevant approach to education – all children can and do.

This is a view shared by international education experts, such as Henry Giroux who writes: "Learning in the post-modern age is located elsewhere – in the popular spheres, organised around rap music, daytime television, fanzines, Hollywood films, sprawling shopping malls, and computer culture, that shape young people's identities through forms of knowledge and desire that are absent from what is taught in high schools. The literacies of the modern age are electronic, aural and image-based..."

Instead of treating television, advertising, music, films, the internet and so on as the enemy, we all – parents, teachers and professionals working with young people – need to make them our allies when it comes to educating our kids.

In other words, we need to rethink our notion of education and ways of learning for all, not just for children with learning differences. We need to acknowledge the technological and multi-tasking skills our kids are rapidly acquiring and make them an intrinsic part of the classroom experience.

Only when we do that will we escape the shackles of what is fast becoming an antiquated and, in many children's (and adult's) minds, outdated curriculum, while also including students whose ways of learning differ from those of many of their peers.

The argument to make the curriculum more inclusive, to incorporate and value verbal, print, visual and aural education methods and outcomes equally; to give students assessment options rather than rigid assessment criteria, is not new.

However, neither is resistance to such an approach, which continues despite evidence from the UK and the USA suggesting that multimedia classrooms are not simply the way of the future for all children; they're the way to their future.



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– all enquiries to Head Office

**School Age Services**  
– contact your local branch

**Family Services**  
– contact your local branch

**All other enquiries**  
– Head Office

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