

## **Web-Based Radio Show**

### **Series on Learning Differences, Learning Challenges, and Learning Strengths:**


#### ***Attention, Sequencing and Organizational Capacities***

**Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D.**

July 7, 2006

Welcome to our web-based radio show. This is Dr. Greenspan and I want to thank you for joining us. Today we're going to complete our series on learning challenges, learning differences, and learning strengths. As you recall, we've been using the metaphor or image of a learning tree, with a tree trunk – having to do with the basic thinking and social skills; the root system – having to do with the basic processing capacities, like auditory and visual-spatial processing; and the branches and even the leaves – having to do with specific behaviors or academic skills. You can really think of this image – this picture – as having many branches and many leaves – involving either academic or learning capacities. It could also involve social skills and emotional skills, as well; it really is a good metaphor for our overall goals, as well as for children with learning challenges and learning differences and learning strengths.

To complete the focus on learning challenges and learning differences and learning strengths, today we're going to talk about attention and sequencing – also sometimes referred to as “executive functioning.” We talked about executive functioning somewhat when we talked about the root system. Today we're going to talk about it again and add some more ideas onto it because it's also a branch that is very important in school work. A lot of children are diagnosed with “an organizational learning disability.” So, in addition to dyslexia or reading problems or math problems or writing problems or oral and written communication problems, we also have children with “organizational problems.” Sometimes they're diagnosed with ADHD or ADD or they just get “lost in the trees” and can't see the big picture and have a hard time with staying focused and organized, completing tasks, or problem solving. It serves for a whole host of challenges. There's also the term that's been introduced that we really




covered in the root system, so we won't go over it again, and that's "nonverbal learning disability," which often refers to children with a combination of visual-spatial problems and some motor planning problems. We covered this in the root system, but it actually shows up with organizational differences, too, in children who are highly verbal but who have difficulties sometimes with math or certain types of reasoning, as well as staying focused and organized.

So today we'll talk about the attention, sequencing, and organizational capacities of children. The key here is to recognize, like before, number one – the first principle is – you get better at what you practice. So you've got to practice the capacity you want to improve, as well as build up your fundamental building blocks. This capacity, perhaps more than any other, is a product of that tree trunk. The higher your level of thinking and social and emotional skills, as we conceptualize them in our functional developmental capacities – from attending, always up to reflective thinking – basically the better your ability will be for sequencing, organizing, staying on task and focusing. If you're a reflective thinker, for example, you can reflect on what you've done; how well you've accomplished your mission; have you done your homework before you talk to your friend? You can't help but evaluate yourself and, therefore, self-correct. Then, if you want to talk to your friend and punt on your homework, at least it's a conscious decision – it's not due to an organizational learning disability or a sequencing problem or being a "space cadet." I'd rather have the child make a conscious choice and then deal with the consequences or confront their own defiance or rebellion than simply not know. Better to be knowing and mischievous or difficult, than not knowing. It'll serve you better later in life when you have to go into the world and "make it."

So the first principle is practice; how best to practice, though, gets us to the second principle. We want to practice organizing and sequencing by using all the senses as much as possible: hearing, language, vision, visual thinking, movement, motor skills and even smell, if we can get it in there. We always deserve a treat, so we can have a little snack while we're organizing ourselves! We use all the senses and the motor system.


Three, and probably the most important, is our old friend emotion. Emotions organize how all the senses work together, as we've discussed; organize for us our goal – if we're invested in something, we want to do it and we tend to remember it. It operates a little bit like hunger – you don't forget you're hungry, usually, because it keeps coming back to remind you. So even if you forget and you get distracted, you get



reminded again. This isn't always for all children – but there are other things that have to do with the body – like going to the bathroom – that you tend to get reminded of – if not now, you'll get another reminder a few minutes later. Now some children tune out these reminders – some children are less sensitive to their own body's sensations. Children who are hypo responsive, for example, may not be aware of their bodily sensations of hunger or a need to go to the bathroom. For these children, even strong internal commands don't always work as easily, although they generally work. But emotions, even for the hypo reactive children, generally are stronger. I've never seen a child who is hypo reactive, who wanted a particular toy or who wanted to go out the door, who didn't keep coming back to it. So even children without language who are very sensory under reactive or hypo reactive, will persist in trying to go to the door and bring Mommy and Daddy to the door or wander towards the door, even if they're aimlessly wandering around the room, showing a persistence of a strong emotional desire. So harnessing that emotional desire is a very important part of your navigational skills in staying focused and organized and attentive. The child who's got reasonable language and is not hypo reactive and wants to talk to a particular friend on the phone will not have a problem remembering to do that; his homework may be another matter – there may not be that same emotional commitment to their homework. So, use and harness the emotions in a way that helps the child keep on task and focused and helps him sequence.


The fourth principle is to improve organizational skills and sequencing, which really comes down to sequencing, i.e., realizing there are 10 steps to solving a problem or getting homework done or getting ready to go out with your friends, is to do extra practice if this is a challenging area. As I'm going to outline below, we want to practice sequencing and practice the skills required for sequencing, whether it's with words or with actions or with receiving information and breaking it into component parts so you can understand it better.

Now, we gave this example when we talked about the root system, but it's worth repeating, just briefly – and you should re-read that section for background, at this particular point, since I'm not going to repeat in detail the things we've covered before, but for a child who has a hard time sequencing or remembering or staying organized when it comes to doing homework, which is very common, remember, we gave the example of having a blackboard in the room with the child and through challenging questions, he's able to outline the sequence for the evening. Often the child will say,



“Well, I don’t have my homework; I forgot it. I lost the paper.” Well, you can call a friend – you can have a pipeline that’s already been established the prior week – because this would’ve occurred before – to the teacher, so the homework can be faxed and we don’t depend on the backpack, so we’ve got it. Or we’ve got a reliable friend we can call. Then we outline what the homework assignment is on the board, as well as what else the child wants to do that evening – like talk to friends, have a snack, play a favorite video game or watch some TV. Next to each thing on the list – this is visual and it’s auditory, so we’re taking care of two of the senses, and the child is writing it down and the child is the active one – the child puts down what his interest is in doing that particular thing, based on a zero to 10 scale. Ten is the high interest, he wants to do it, it’s something fun like talking to friends or playing a video game; doing math homework is low interest, maybe a minus two or a zero. So the child is acknowledging his emotional interest in the item. Then next to that he marks down the likelihood it’ll get done on his own without parents being a watchdog. The child can use a zero to ten scale for this, too. What we’re doing here is the child is outlining for himself an organizational analysis of what he’s got to do, how much he wants to do it, and what he thinks is the likelihood he will do it, knowing himself. So he’s being a reflective thinker. That makes everything conscious in his awareness and we’ve got it all written down now. Then we can negotiate with him how to get through the sequence. He may order it differently than we would. We can debate and argue. He may want to call his friends first or play the video game first, and then at 10 o’clock he’ll get to the homework. We may think, “Well, that’s not going to work.” So we may organize that he does A and B and then gets to do E, which is talk to his friend; then he does F and G and then he does H, which is play a video game for a little bit. Then he may do two more low-level things before doing something else he wants to do. We can set it up, initially, that either he reports to us or we come in and check and on him. If necessary, we may have to sit there with him while he’s doing the work because now it’s deliberate, it’s no longer, “I forgot.” We do whatever is needed. Basically the more the child can do on his own, the better, but we may have to work to get there, gradually, and we may have to create, also, external incentives, such as extra time on a favorite activity for getting some of the least desired things done. So, in a sense, the emotional positive feelings about the less desirable items get transferred and combined with the more positive items as they get more time on those that are more positive in exchange for doing those they find less positive.


So that’s a way of practicing organization at home. This can be done for any task – not just simply homework. It could be chores around the house on the weekend or



during the week. It could be for writing thank-you notes after hosting a birthday party for the child. It could be anything that requires organization, sequencing, and focus, particularly where there is likely to be mixed motivation on the child's part. The child could plan to be ready tomorrow morning and organizing what he's going to wear, which can be outlined on the board ahead of time. Or the child could outline the steps required to get ready for school in the morning so he's not late. This could include what time to get up, what to do first, second, what the desirable things are, what the less desirable things are, etc. This way the grumpy child in the morning has prepared at night or early in the evening for the tasks at hand.

Now, also, there are other things that come up pretty regularly as sequencing that are part of regular academic and school life, like writing an essay, which requires sequencing ideas. We talked about how to start with emotionally meaningful debates around "Why I'm better than my sibling" or "Why I like this food best" or "Why these are my favorite games or TV shows," and we use that to provide a structure, i.e., a box with his main point, his examples or supporting points, and a conclusion that we and then apply to other areas. I won't re-go over that again, but we're also taking advantage of the child's emotions by using emotionally meaningful subjects first because that's where there is a natural tendency to be organized. Then we show the child how to use those same principles when we apply them to less emotionally meaningful topics, like why they didn't like Mark Twain. We also start by picking something the child has a strong point of view on, from whatever it is that he's doing academically. So even if you're discussing a book, find an aspect of the book that you do care about, whether you liked or didn't like the book. If you didn't like it, there's some part of it that you enjoyed or didn't enjoy or that you agreed with or disagreed with. Feel free to argue with the teacher's point of view, which is always a good way for a child who likes to be oppositional and negative to get the emotions going and stay organized. So we want to practice that.


Also, we want to practice things like following directions. So we want to create little games at home with typical classroom directions, like "Copy what I've done on the board," or "Get in a line and stand in line because we're going to lunch or we're going to a fire drill." We want to give them directions that have to do with math that require two or three steps. We also want to practice doing questions that are especially difficult, such as those involving reading comprehension and that aren't just factual, like, "Who discovered America?" or "Who invented the telephone?" Questions that have double



negatives in them are particularly difficult, so you might have the question, “Who was the best scientist during the Revolutionary War period, not taking into account Benjamin Franklin?” Now that’s a tough one because you’ve got a negative in there and you’ve got, really, two ideas in there: Who was the best scientist, but you can’t use Benjamin Franklin because, let’s say, he was just used in the question before that. So, some kids have trouble with that because they’re sequencing language in a complicated way. It’s kind of like college board questions they used when I was a student where you had to pick one and three or two and four or one, two, three, and four as the answer – that involves tough sequencing because you’ve got a pattern to consider and it requires a lot of verbal dexterity – not just knowing the answer.

Similarly, lining up your numbers in complicated long division problems or multiplication problems or math problems involving many steps requires motor skills where you’ve got to line things up and you’ve got to remember the steps verbally or visually. That, too, can be challenging for lots of kids. Now the point is all these things – from writing an essay, where you’re figuring out your main point and supporting points, to complex questions with single and double negatives in them, to following directions – is that they can all be practiced. But if they are only practiced at the time you have to do them in school, you’re not practicing very much. In other words, you may get one essay a week, which is not a lot of practice. On the other hand, if you practice your essays three or four times a day, but are not actually doing a whole essay; rather, you’re just outlining a topic and a subject and how you would approach it – such as, “How would you prove you’re better than your brother?” or “How would you prove this TV show is better than another TV show?” – you can do it in a few minutes by just outlining it and getting the hang of the structure, and then you can actually write out whole sentences and paragraphs to put the “meat on the bones,” so to speak.

Similarly, you can play games with double negative questions, giving points for the proper interpretation of the question and providing rewards or incentives. You can play games like “Simon Says” with following directions where you have one thing like, “touch your toes” and then you have three things: “Simon Says, touch your toes, touch your elbows, touch your nose. Simon Says stand in a line and walk 10 steps, then walk backwards five steps.” You can go from one command to two commands to three to four to five to see how many the child can do; then you stretch it, all within a “Simon Says” game. They can just be fun games because you can have competition with a child




and his friends or with siblings or with Daddy and “Junior” competing. So the child becomes a good direction-follower.

A great way to practice these skills are treasure hunt games where you can give verbal directions, starting off with simple ones like single-steps directions, and then you give multiple directions to find the treasure, which can be a great prize. You can use maps together with the verbal directions, or just maps or visual directions with no talking so the child has to “follow the arrow,” so to speak, on the map, again with simple directions and then with more complex ones. The simple ones could just have a picture where the treasure is hidden with arrows pointing to a room labeled in the house – like TV room or bedroom. Or it could be a complicated series with three or four arrows going from one room to another room.

We can also set up obstacle courses where you have to get through the course to get the prize or you have to go through a blocked pathway to find the treasure, with different degrees of motor difficulty, as well as sequencing, because you’ve got to figure out how to climb up the to the platform to get through the hula hoop to go down the slide and then through the tunnel and then take a swing over the moat, because you’re not allowed to touch something below to get to the prize. So this is like a Rube Goldberg cartoon with a number of steps involving sequencing on the motor side. Another good way to practice is when children are motivated and want something or want their parents to do something for them, parents should always be “lazy” and need their help. If they want to go outside and play, you’re happy to do it but they’ve got to get your coat and your hat and your shoes and other things; you start off with one simple thing but then three weeks later you give them a list of four or five things, so they’re becoming good sequencers. Having chores around the house to do – involving the child early in life in being a citizen of the house, with chores – is very good for both contributing to the household and learning to sequence and organize and stay organized.

So if you take into account these suggestions, plus the ones I gave for executive functioning when we talked about the root system – which can start very early in life in a preventive way with infants and toddlers and preschoolers – we can build up the child’s sequencing capacities, and that’s the name of the game: to strengthen that capacity, like any capacity for reading or writing and practice gets you there. Children will start off with very different basic abilities – some will be stronger, more organized and better sequencers, initially, and some are going to be weaker. You may find, also,




that your child is better in one system than another. Some will be better with verbal but very weak when it comes to motor sequencing – they can't learn a new dance or new sport because it requires seeing movement in someone else that they can't copy or can't sequence, but they're very good at writing an essay. Other children will be just the reverse – excellent at sports or dance but very weak at writing the essay. So here you practice the area, also, that is harder for you. The child who's a gifted athlete will pick up tennis quickly; the other child, who's not a gifted athlete may need step-by-step lessons, learning one step at a time and then graduating to two and then to three, but that will get his dexterity up.

I always like to say that you have a child who's organized – and this is a key lesson point – whether it's writing an essay or playing tennis or anything else, when they can teach it to you. So, see one, do one, teach one. When they can teach you how to do it, they've really mastered it, whether it's a math problem or playing tennis or having the child invent games that he teaches you how to play. Now they're not only creating new sequences, like on the motor side, but they're then using verbal skills. And be “thick” so they have to draw diagrams and show you how to do it. My son, Jake, who works with children with special needs, came up with the idea of having the child teach the parent how to play baseball or how to play soccer if the child enjoys those sports – or how to play a video game. Again, if the child is teaching you, the child is learning to sequence and is motivated because he's the boss and he likes to do it.

Another good way is playing a game where the child is the boss – how would he run the house? How would he organize the evening? What would he have you do, since you're always making him do things? Again, it's a very good sequencing exercise – what are all the things they'd have you do?

In addition to the above, to strengthen this ability, another component that helps children sequence is to do things on automatic pilot very rapidly. Some people are very good, for example, at following directions – they read directions and can put together a new piece of equipment and they've got it. Other people don't even need to read the directions; they just look at the equipment and look at some diagrams and they can do it. Other people who are gifted students in many other areas – myself included – can make neither heads nor tails out of how to put together some new piece of equipment or how to operate a computer program! So, we're all different in that capacity and we have relative strengths and relative weaknesses, but when you do something on automatic pilot – like a person who does crossword puzzles easily or puts




together equipment easily, particularly for children – it’s fun because you do it well and you do it easily – it’s like a gifted athlete, a gifted dancer, or a gifted musician – you take to it like a fish to water. But if you don’t do it easily you tend to avoid it. Kids operate on that principle – they do what’s easy and fun. It’s not that there are good students and bad students; there are kids who learn reading and writing easily and they enjoy school, and other kids who dislike school because what they’re focusing on for hours a day is not fun – playing with their friends outside or playing computer games is more fun.

So here are ways to increase a child’s speed and get him on automatic pilot. Some of these are sequencing skills that we’ve been talking about. Here are some additional games that can be played that improve speed and get some of these sequencing on automatic pilot.

One just has to do with rhythmicity and timing – lots of dancing and singing to music and doing more complicated steps in a rhythmical fashion. Dancing is a great example. I’ve been involved in research on a product called the Interactive Metronome, where there’s actually computer feedback for rhythmic activity, like clapping one’s hands, hitting one’s legs, moving one’s feet, which also improves rhythmicity and timing. We’ve done research showing it’s improving academic skills, as well as attention. So one can look into that on the Interactive Metronome website, as well as just generally doing a lot of rhythmicity and timing kinds of fun things with more complicated steps in a rhythmical and timed way.

Also, we have games that require attending to details. You can have those games where you see how many things you can identify in a picture and make a contest out of it – see how fast you can identify a certain number of different things; or have pictures or objects that you move quickly and the child has to look at them and you see how many he can identify as you move them quickly across his eye span; or you have him in a room with a bunch of toys and dolls and stuffed animals and games and things, and you see how many things he can notice around the room, using 30 seconds for him and Daddy or a sibling to have a contest. Also, going outside and seeing how many things you can identify on a nature walk is very good. So there are lots of ways to do that, which has to do with taking in what’s around you. So, basically, if you’re in a car it’s a great thing to identify what you can see – not just other cars, but houses and different colors, different shapes, different cars and trucks on the road, people walking – what can you identify? To give it added valence, they can say what they like and what they don’t like. So you look at things and then you give an opinion about it. I like it or I don’t




like it; I like that color, I don't like it. They can tell their favorite car; for example, a parent can say, "Identify five different cars you see on the road and pick your favorite and explain why it's your favorite."

Then we move from details to similar things so the child is seeing patterns, like colors, shapes, and the functions of things. So, we can see how many blue cars we see, how many red cars, and how many different shapes. We can see while we're riding in the car or similarly while we're looking at pictures or walking around the house or in a room or on a nature walk. So we can look for patterns and that gets us to start classifying things as "bigger" or "smaller" or "larger." We can do that quickly, too. Again, look at these objects – we're identifying and classifying them according to size, shape, color, and function. What things help us move? What things help us get someplace or another? What things are just fun? What things are living? What things are inanimate or not living, etc.?

When we get to another level – symbolizing or labeling or using ideas, we can match pictures and words and see how quickly we can do it. We can use cards with pictures and words and we can also play more complicated games, like those I've mentioned that my colleague, Harry Wachs, developed, where you sort of match letters and numbers and matching different symbols. Initially you start just matching, let's say, the fifth letter with the number five. Then you have to match the fifth letter with 2 numbers lower than it would be in a sequence, or two numbers higher than what it would be, and see how fast you can do that. We show the child cards and he has to do it real quickly and that requires manipulating symbols – a visual symbol and a verbal symbol or a letter symbol and a number symbol – very rapidly and that, too, develops speed and dexterity in your sequencing skills.

We can do games of imagination – let's see how many different things we can imagine happening with this doll and this car and this playhouse. How many different feelings could this character have, etc.?

Then we can play games that involve more thinking and we can do games of "same" and "different" and small vs. big, so the child can put all the things that are the same in this group and he puts all the things that are different in that group, and we can then give the groups different labels. We can sort same by color, same by size, same by shape, same by touch – according to whether something feels smooth or rough – and, again, have the child do it real quickly with different objects. By sorting and by doing it



quickly the child is, again, learning to sequence very, very rapidly after, of course, he has the basic idea; at first you do it slowly.


Then we can see higher-level thinking, where the child is learning, for example, that a tall, thin glass has just as much water as a short, fat one. So we have a quantity of water and we see how many different receptacles that water will fill up and the child has to experiment and do it from slowly to quickly. You can have a bunch of receptacles, some of which he fills up, some of which are too small and some of which are too big, and the child can guess after experimenting with a few or he can experiment with all of them.

The same thing can occur with how many different ways the child can put five blocks together and keep it just five. How many different things can he build: a tower, a snake, a car, a truck, a triangle? How many different ways, in other words, can the blocks be configured? Now they're learning basically that quantity stays the same no matter how you configure it or how you organize it – they're learning an important lesson of cognitive life, but at the same time they're learning to do it quickly and they're learning to be creative – to see how many they can do. We're not just asking them whether the snake and the tower are the same number; but after they get the hang of that, then they have to be the one engineering it.

We can do it with shapes and with a certain number of blocks; we can do it with water; we can do it with clay, seeing how many different shapes they can make out of the clay in a minute, starting off with 10 pieces of clay all the same exact size and seeing how many different forms they can put it in. Again, this teaches them the consistency of quantity, but also since they're doing it quickly it helps them learn to sequence.

We can have them do some of Harry Wachs' visual-spatial transforming tasks, where they're actually transforming things, creating mirror images of different designs, for example, or creating a design so that you'll see it the way they see it, so they're looking at it from one angle and you're looking at it from another angle, and they have to figure out how you're looking at it and how they're looking at it and then reverse it so they're looking at it the way you are, and you're looking at it the way they are! All that's pretty complicated and requires high-level transforming in your mind and you can see how fast they can do it.

We can then work on our higher-level thinking, like gray-area thinking and reflective thinking and comparative thinking, also using speed, but you can prioritize




among pictures what your favorite is, and then your second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth favorite, seeing how fast you can do it. You can do it for colors, for shapes, for different foods – all done with pictures or done with verbal labels. How quickly can you create your list of priorities?

You can have debate games where you have short time periods to defend your point of view and they can tell you why A is better than B or why B is better than C or why this TV show is better than that TV show, where you only get 30 seconds to prepare your argument and then you have to argue it.


A few other ideas that get into the higher-level thinking skills – you can have contests with creating new dances or creating new games where you’re having to be reflective and creative in things involving movement, or things involving sequencing ideas or pictures. We can have the kind of games involving complex judgments where you have a question like, “What would you do in this situation?” where you’re in conflict and see how many solutions you can come up with quickly. So we can do lots of these kinds of things, as well as many more you’ll think about, and the idea here is to create games where you’re involved in everything from simple movement and identifying objects to complex thinking tasks, all done faster and faster and faster, but in a fun way so there are no losers, in the sense that you adapt it to the child and you create the game in such a way that the child is successful 70 to 80 percent of the time and that way he’ll “hang in there.” So for one child you may narrow the time to prepare a debate to a minute and another child will get 10 minutes, and gradually you’ll get him to eight minutes and five minutes and a year later may be at one minute to prepare the debate. So always set it up so the child can succeed 70 to 80 percent of the time; never set it up so the child is a constant loser to Daddy or to a sibling. Even the playing field if it’s an older sibling and a younger sibling who are playing together or if it’s Daddy and the child or Mommy and the child, and just make it fun. That way we improve this basic ability.

So just to summarize, to improve executive functioning and sequencing and organizational skills, practice what you need to do. Practice it as close as possible to the real situation you’re confronting at school, like with writing essays, as we gave the example, or of doing homework or lining up math columns; but also work on the fundamentals with these speed games, with fun games that build the foundations, and do the ones we talked about, some of which I’m probably repeating here, that we talked about when we talked about the root system and executive functioning. As a general philosophy, remember the first thing we said: The stronger your functional



developmental capacities, your basic thinking skills, and your basic social and emotional capacities of the tree trunk, the easier it will be and the stronger your organizational skills will be. So always work on your child being a big picture thinker, both with words and with visual images. Have your child always see the forest and the trees. So you can work on details, but also work on “How does this all fit into a pattern? What’s the big picture here?” If the child is talking about all the “mean” things you’ve done to him or about the kids at school, at the end of the discussion, after you listen empathetically and patiently, ask the child how he would summarize what he’s described; ask how he would describe his day, overall. He may say, “It was a lousy day because lots of bad things happened to me.” Okay, that’s seeing the big picture. You can then say, “Was there anything good about it, any good little thing?” “Nothing today. No – not even a one.” But that’s big-picture thinking and you’re helping the child. Remember, also, that in doing these exercises, only when the child is taking initiative and teaching you something or telling you something is he really learning. So you can be challenging the child, but not doing for the child. You can be guiding him through your challenges, through your questions so you are active and you are teaching – you’re not letting the child just go off and do his own thing; but you’re always helping the child practice taking the initiative and you’re the challenger. It’s a much harder role than just telling the child what to do; it takes time and effort to ask a child, “How can we get the garbage taken out? How can we get the table set? Who should do what?” But we need to negotiate, not simply say, “Here, just put the forks on.” Let the child participate in the decision, in the initiative, in the thinking – that helps the child be a thinker and a good organizer and a better sequencer as he gets older.


There’s one other topic I want to cover just briefly, and we have covered it before. It’s really a separate topic, but it has to do with the branch system. It has to do with the role of anxiety or uncertainty. All children get anxious when they feel uncertain and some children are more anxious than others and some children “fall apart” more than other children do. Some children become more negative, more withdrawn, more avoidant. We see many, many patterns in children that make learning hard. The key thing to remember is that, while we’re not going to talk about emotional development, generally, here, and all the family patterns and internal feelings that can contribute to it, or processing differences that can contribute – because we’ve talked about that in other books and other places – we want to make the point here that when a child feels uncertain about his ability for something, either because he has weak fine motor skills due to the way his nervous system works, or because he has weak visual-spatial skills



because of the way his eyes work, or he has a language challenge because it's hard for him to process or comprehend what you're saying and he does better with his own ideas, for example, so he has a receptive language problem (sometimes referred to as a central auditory processing problem) – he's going to feel anxious. Whatever his challenge is, when he has to do something requiring that skill he's going to feel unsure of himself, just as an adult would if he were required to learn a new dance step and he's stepping on everyone's feet or if he were asked to do a crossword puzzle and is very weak verbally. You feel unsure of yourself.

When a child feels unsure of himself, he feels anxious, he feels incompetent, he feels bad, he feels like "my brain doesn't work." A lot of children will use these metaphors and can get quite depressed about it. What happens is the child feels unsure of himself and then gets anxious, then has a number of different escape routes, from just avoiding the task entirely – playing ostrich, burying his head in the sand, "I don't have homework" (out of school, out of sight, out of mind) – or they just become negative, "I'm not going to do it" or oppositional or they become impulsive around that particular activity whenever it gets raised, or they become depressed or they become aggressive or they become disorganized or fragmented or they do what I call "escape into fantasy," living in a pretend world and not dealing with the reality of school work or the reality of doing chores around the house or really taking into account what you think is important.


For the child who tends to be fragmented in his thinking and not take into account anyone else's thoughts all the time, we have a more fundamental developmental problem helping that child connect his ideas to other ideas, and that is an important part of learning and something we should attend to and work on. But I'm talking here about children who basically have abilities but then retreat from them in the areas where they feel unsure or uncertain, so around math or around writing or around doing their homework. In other words, they are unsure of themselves, they get anxious, and then they select – not consciously, always – one of their escape routes, whatever their favorite one is. Our job, then, is to recognize the anxiety and to empathize with it. Let them talk about how much they like or hate math and if they were the boss of the school what they would do with math. Let them verbalize and fantasize how they can get rid of this nuisance that's a thorn in their side at school, whether it's math or writing, etc. That's the first step.



Number two is to provide some extra practice in that basic ability, like we've been talking about. For example, if fine motor's hard, give them a tape recorder to do their essays while we work on fine motor capacities to build up their skills in that area, like we talked about with the root system, doing drawing and coloring games and other games involving the fingers until their fine motor skills build up a little bit more. Give them a word processor so we can teach them to type, as well as dictate. So we work around it during this time to practice that skill. We also don't overburden them with that particular thing so they can enjoy other facets of learning and other facets of school while they're working on that.

We try to help them verbalize their anger and their frustration, and there's also a lot of anger that the world has been unfair to them and they're mad at the teacher, they're mad at you, they're mad at everyone who's making them do these things that are so hard. So help them verbalize and empathize with the feelings – the sad feelings and the feelings that “my brain doesn't work well” and help them identify their escape routes, “Oh! There goes the ostrich again.” Make it kind of fun for them and let the child say, “I'm being an ostrich and I'm going to be an ostrich because I need a break.” Gradually, come back to it so they can master that task by building up their fundamentals in the ways we've been describing, while you empathize and help them verbalize the feelings around it. And recognize this pattern; this is always going to make a learning challenge or a child's learning differences 10 times more difficult – avoiding the areas where their differences make it hard for them. Even children with learning strengths will have favorite areas and we want to help them be super competent in other areas, too, so we'll want to be aware of these same dimensions. The child who's good at everything and then runs into a hurdle will feel the same anxiety, maybe even more so, because he has no practice with it. So the child who's been great up until the third or fourth grade but starts running into problems in the higher grades needs the same sort of support.

To help the child with his anxiety, empathize with the feelings, help the child identify the escape route, strengthen the vulnerable ability gradually through fun activities with 70 to 80 percent mastery, work with the teachers in the school to unburden the child – not completely – but lessen the load in that area, and work on strengths so the child has a balanced day. Over time, we'll see the child get more flexible. Where the problem is more pervasive, in the sense that the child lacks some of



the fundamentals – it's not just an escape route – then work on those fundamentals, obviously, in the ways we've been describing in earlier discussions.

This completes our series on learning challenges, learning differences, and learning strengths. We may have some additional ideas that we'll insert into later shows as they occur, but for now we're going to move on. In the next show we're going to begin talking about all the whole range of mental health problems that children can have and a family approach to prevention and also intervention, whatever the age of the child, from infants on up through teenagers and even young adults. We're going to cover all the different major mental health problem areas, from conduct disorders to anxiety and depression to more severe disorders, and show how the principles of our DIR/Floortime model can be applied to a whole range of mental health disorders. So that will be a new series starting next time and we're going to start that next week. So thank you for joining us today and I'll be with you again next week.