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PARENTS' GUIDE

Spotting learning disabilities at a young age

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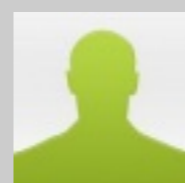


Early identification and intervention with children having special needs is commonplace in North America. Pediatricians and many parents are sensitive to early learning issues that can arise in young children as early as one to two years old. In the early years when there are frequent doctor visits, parents may experience routine questions that aim to highlight whether or not a child may have reached their developmental milestones.

Does your child look at you when you enter the room? Does he throw tantrum and cry frequently? Does he play with toys appropriately for approximately ten minutes at a time? These and other questions may be presented to parents in an effort to identify any early learning problems that toddlers may face.

Early learning problems are quite common across the whole population. Contrary to popular belief, speech slurring, trouble with handwriting, social avoidance, and other developmental delays are fairly common amongst many young boys and girls. In other words, not all children are proficient in every subject. Everybody has his or her unique strengths and weaknesses. For some children, it may take many years for them to acquire even the most basic skills while others learn readily through observation of others.

For children in Hong Kong, the same is true. However, some pediatricians might not be trained to spot learning difficulties, or might not ask the types of routine questions aimed to highlight developmental delays or learning differences. First time parents, who



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do not have another developing child in their family to whom they can compare, can easily miss learning problems in those all-important first few years.

Cultural differences in the parenting styles between North American parents and Hong Kong parents may further complicate and compound the issue of early identification. It is a scary idea for some Hong Kong parents to entertain the possibility that their child could have a mild or even serious learning disability. Denial is commonplace, and is the enemy of progress.

Early Intervention (EI) works to reverse or possibly even eliminate developmental delays in many children. In North America, EI is an entitlement program and is provided through the Department of Health in all states. Special education, applied behavior analysis, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy are the most commonly prescribed services for young children who have been identified as having some type of learning problem. The earlier the intervention, the better the prognosis and treatment in most cases.

Children between the ages of one and three and in their early years have very plastic brains, as they experience a concentrated amount of neurological growth that takes place rather quickly. This is a critical time for intensive interventions that can reduce problematic behaviors and help to shape appropriate language, social, and play skills. This is not to say that older children are incapable of learning. In my view, all people can learn at all ages, however there is some truth to the belief in the window of opportunity that has been described in younger children. The window never closes, although it may become narrower.

Fortunately, in Hong Kong, there are schools and professionals that are accustomed to working with young children having special needs and their families, some in English and some in Cantonese. When a family decides to begin the journey of special education and related therapies together with caring and professional teachers and therapists, they have taken the right steps that that their whole family will inevitably benefit from.

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