

GEMM LEARNING

It's never too late to build learning skills

by Geoff Nixon

Parents often struggle to identify whether their children's learning challenges are subject-specific or more broad. Clues such as interest in reading, focus at school and attitude towards homework should be used to help parents identify whether their children's difficulties are at the foundation level. Based on these cues, parents can seek appropriate resources to help them.

Programs are often classified in two categories: tutoring and learning intervention. Tutoring re-teaches the same content in a new way; learning intervention strives to change the way children learn. Tutoring is beneficial for children with isolated difficulties in one or two subjects, whereas learning intervention is better suited to children with more fundamental learning issues.

Neuroscientists now know that the window to impact a child's learning ability does not close at age three. During the past decade, advances in cognitive research (i.e., how the brain learns) and neuroscience have made brain rewiring, known as learning intervention, a reality. Intervening in the learning process helps a struggling learner by strengthening the basic cognitive abilities required to read and learn.

These scientific advances have been made possible with functional MRIs, which take videos of the brain at work. The functional MRI allows scientists to test new theories and learn more about how the brain adapts and changes.

With the advent of learning-intervention programs, parents now have access to more resources to help their children succeed in school. The question is, how do you know if your child can benefit from learning intervention?

By examining the struggles of a fictional student, parents can decide if tutoring will help their child succeed or if intervention is the key to improved academic performance.

When Tutoring Is Not Enough

In kindergarten, Joan was not learning her letter sounds. Her parents thought all she needed was a little help to jump-start her reading. In first grade, they hired a tutor. It helped. But then in second grade, reading comprehension became a problem, so they brought in another tutor. Joan even struggled with math once they began studying word problems.

Joan's difficulties are most likely linked to reading comprehension, a critical and foundational skill. Joan is a good candidate for

learning intervention that will target the root cause of her learning challenge, the glitch, and train her brain to receive and process information in a new way.

Built on the neuroscience principles of frequency and intensity, the learning intervention will strive to change the way Joan learns. The program will use the brain's natural ability to adapt and change to modify learning skills by engaging and "exercising" the brain's neural pathways. Through this program, Joan's reading, language and comprehension skills can improve. Upon completion, her newfound learning skills can be applied to all subjects.

When To Tutor, When To Intervene

For many children, there is no glitch that needs correcting, but rather a blind spot in one subject. In these cases, tutoring is the right choice, especially in later grades. When children's struggles are isolated to one subject, they are good candidates for tutoring. By presenting the same material in a new way, tutoring is particularly effective at filling in small knowledge gaps and helping children to master math facts.

For those who struggle with reading or to stay engaged in class, there usually is a glitch. Parents often assume children will outgrow their learning issues, but most often the problem does not go away. It simply morphs from a decoding issue in early grades to a comprehension issue in later grades.

Detecting the real problem is also challenging, making it difficult for parents to assess which learning intervention program will be most beneficial to their child.

To guide parents in choosing the appropriate program or resource, a professional evaluation is recommended. By treating challenges at the onset, parents can minimize their children's frustration with poor academic performance. The brain is a powerful and adaptive organ that can be exercised and challenged to help children unlock their full learning potential.

Gemm Learning is a learning-intervention service that builds the fundamental cognitive skills required to read and learn. The company's main offering is Fast ForWord software, available as an in-center or home-based program. Gemm Learning has centers in Greenwich, Pelham and Scarsdale.

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