

INSIDE OUT or OUTSIDE IN?

Perceptions of the Learning-Disabled Young Person



INSIDE OUT or OUTSIDE IN?

BY BERT KRUGER SMITH

Young people with learning disabilities have, for years, been enigmas to themselves and puzzles to those around them. Before their troubles were pinpointed, they simply seemed unlike other children or incapable of doing what others could.

Once a diagnosis was made, tutoring and corrective programs were instituted on behalf of the young people. Reading skills were addressed; math deficiencies were corrected; motor abilities were enlarged.

In fact, teachers, parents, tutors, and others were so engrossed in trying to help the young person academically that they sometimes lost sight of the fact that beneath the deficit was a human being, hurting and longing to be like others in his age group.

Many of the children who were the subject of academic attention are now into late adolescence or adulthood. They are moving into the world, where they find that they must adapt socially and psychologically to their peers without having the shelter of home and family.

The development of a good self concept is a vital ingredient in the successful life of such a person. Learning social skills, having the ability to meet people and to respond to them positively, are necessary adjuncts for adult encounters. How the person develops internally is as important as how he reads or computes mathematical problems.

The way a person feels about himself shapes much of his behavior from early years on. The children with learning disabilities have often had difficulty in perceiving themselves in positive manner.



INSIDE OUT

How does the world look from inside the skin of a learning disabled person? Hurt and bewilderment are two feelings common to all such young people. Even before they can articulate their emotions, these children know that something is wrong and that they cannot do what other children can. Sometimes children show their hurt in unacceptable ways. Sometimes they may simply seem indifferent.

No matter what outer manifestations, these children hurt. Perhaps nowhere has the feeling been put more poignantly than in *To Race the Wind* by Harold Krents, a blind boy. He wrote, "I once knew a little boy who spent a million recess periods standing right in the middle of a windswept playground just praying that someone—anyone—would notice him and knowing all the time that nobody would... I once knew an adolescent who always sat at an empty table in the junior high school cafeteria pretending that he wasn't even aware that he was sitting next to emptiness."¹

It is not the disability with reading or math so much as the disability with the equation of living that often puts these children into a state where they are unable to function well. Each person is a one-of-a-kind human being attempting to reach other human beings across the caverns of individual loneliness. Those with special difficulties like learning disabilities have, in a sense, an added distance to travel.

Each person's perception is colored by what he has learned and felt and experienced. The

story is told that four painters started out to paint the same theme, a landscape in Tivoli near Rome. They knew one another, had similar backgrounds, and had studied in the same school of art. They all agreed to paint the landscape as clearly and as faithfully as they could. Still, the result was that when the pictures were compared, they were uniquely different.

From inside out, the learning-disabled person feels different and often feels rejected. What he needs most of all is to learn self-acceptance.

Dr. Erich Fromm has said that one cannot reach out to love other people until he first learns to love himself. Dr. Fromm is not talking narcissism but, instead, is explaining that it is necessary to accept our own feelings of both positive and negative kinds and to accept ourselves before we can then be receptive to those traits in others. He wrote:

From this it follows that my own self must be as much an object of my love as another person. The affirmation of one's own life, happiness, growth, freedom is rooted in one's capacity to love, i.e., in care, respect, responsibility, and knowledge. If an individual is able to love productively, he loves himself too; if he can love only others, he cannot love at all.²

Without that sense of love one feels separate. Again, as Dr. Fromm explains:

The experience of separateness arouses anxiety; it is, indeed, the source of all anxiety. Being separate means being cut off, without any capacity to use my human powers. Hence

to be separate means to be helpless, unable to grasp the world—things and people—actively; it means that the world can invade me without my ability to react. Thus, separateness is the source of intense anxiety.³

Looking from the inside out, this young person needs to learn that he is no less worthwhile than anyone else, even though he may be different. Family members or teachers can help shore up those inward feelings he has about himself.

All of us have areas of frustration; we often compensate for our frustrations or our inadequacies; we sometimes overcompensate; and we occasionally overreact to stimuli. We all have adjustment mechanisms which we call upon to help cope with our daily lives.

We may compensate, or overcompensate, for a lack of height or lack of money or lack of brain or lack of social graces. We may find various kinds of escape mechanisms. We may walk out on unpleasant situations or delay them indefinitely or carry on our fantasies in magazines or motion pictures or daydreaming.

Or, we may regress back to a period when we were happy and without problems. If that period happens to be the time when we were an infant, we may spend a large percent of our time with food in our mouths and thereby become prime candidates for Weight Watchers or whatever technique is currently popular for losing weight.

We may rationalize our failures or laziness or temper. Or, we may project our feelings on to someone else. We may say that something

will not work when we mean, deep down, that we cannot make it work. We may build up all kinds of defense mechanisms to permit us to escape or withdraw. We may become aggressive, or we may repress unpleasant experiences.

All of us are aware, perhaps dimly, of the various means of meeting problems; yet we use our rationalizations or mechanisms as crutches. Young learning-disabled people, too, have their "crutches." They may need extra help to develop feelings of self worth.

Many of the social skills involve a sensitivity to subtlety, an awareness of tones of voice, a realization of time and other people's moods. Often the learning-disabled person has "skipped" that period of learning or has been so busy coping with other kinds of needed skills that he has not been able to develop or acquire the kind of sensitive response which is demanded in many social situations.

Sometimes not understanding the subtlety of a humorous remark might be enough to set such a person in a bad light in a social situation. Not being able to interpret a person's facial expression may cause a learning-disabled person to make an inappropriate response. Quite often the inability to gain information from auditory or visual sources may make this person lose the trend or the theme of a "happening."

Persons dependent upon eyeglasses for reading may find themselves in parallel situations. Needing to gain information by a quick reading of something, they may respond inap-

propriately if their glasses are not at hand. One almost has to see what the other person expects by way of response in order not to embarrass that person or oneself.

There may be some parallels in the situation of many learning-disabled youth and the plight of children from poverty areas when Headstart first began. Those children who had not had the constant stimulus of language, family conversation, of discussion, of books, of music, or even of television programs, were at a great disadvantage when they took I.Q. tests with children who had had such exposure. Similar lacks are apparent in the social area as the learning-disabled person tries to learn how to cope in an adult world.

For any person—and perhaps most desperately for the young person who is just beginning to date or to try and find his way in a social world—a lack of knowledge about everyday procedures is devastating. For adolescents most particularly, conformity is vital, and nothing could be more demoralizing to such a child as to be labeled “different.” Thus, if the learning-disabled person demonstrates clumsiness in athletic situations or shows other inabilities—such as ineptness at reading a menu or making change at a motion picture or understanding exactly how to act going out to dinner at a restaurant—these inabilities are enough to set him off and apart from his peers.

When the young adult is feeling desperately the need to belong to his culture as a person in his own right, often the adults around him are still struggling to help him acquire the kinds of

academic skills which are more than difficult for him. If the same amount of attention were given to developing his social ability or his work ability or his positive areas of achievement, he might be able to succeed in places where no one had thought that he would be able to so do.

A well-known sociologist, Dr. Charles Horton Cooley, wrote about the looking-glass self. He explained that we develop our self-image from the way others react to us, that is, from the reflection of ourselves we pick up in the behavior of other people. We have all had the experience of going into a room and feeling immediately inferior, unkempt, or disliked. Likewise, we have had the opposite happening—that of coming into a room where people made us feel welcome, wanted, and desirable. What we have seen and felt in their eyes and in their voices has determined how we perceived ourselves during the remainder of the time.

How, then, might it be for a young person for whom the mirror was often distorted, giving back images which were less than desirable?

What our young people are feeling from inside out may be a kind of hurt which does not lend itself to words, or perhaps the words are not there for expression. Often children speak through their behavior rather than through their sentences.



OUTSIDE IN

As we look from outside at the learning disabled people in our communities, we wonder in what ways we can be most helpful to them, in what ways we can help to shore up their confidences and their feelings of self-worth. Here are a few possibilities.

FIRST, we can help to reshape the environment to remove obstacles. As individuals we can help to make our communities psychologically "barrier free." Through our example, we can help others know of the needs of special populations.

SECOND, we can stimulate and challenge such young people to develop their personal abilities. At any age and in any setting the chief resource must be the individual's own interest, drive, and enthusiasm for self-fulfillment.

Even in this he may be helped. He may be inspired to raise his sights and to recognize his own abilities. And he may be encouraged in the development of values which will give meaning and direction to his own fulfillment. Happiness, despite popular notions to the contrary, is not best conceived as a state in which all one's wishes are satisfied and all one's hopes fulfilled. For most human beings, happiness is more surely found in striving toward meaningful goals.

The play "Children of a Lesser God" deals with a deaf woman who tries with her whole being to make the hearing world know who she is and where she lives emotionally. One

reviewer says that what makes the play is that compassion is not for those who cannot hear sounds but for those who cannot hear the chords of communication between people. The theme can be applied to more than the deaf—to women, to ethnic minorities, to our learning-disabled children, to all who are considered "lesser."

As we learn to communicate with our learning-disabled young people, and, following our example, as they learn to communicate with others, they will gain in understanding, in competence, and in ability to meet life.

Even if these children carry the extra burden of handicap, they may become stronger for learning to balance the burden. They may develop new sensitivity and understanding.

A physics teacher asked this question of her class, "When can you see farther—at night or in the daytime?" Several students quickly answered, "In the daytime, of course," But the teacher replied, "The most distant object you can see in the daytime is the sun. But at night you can see stars which are millions of times farther away."

As parents achieve this recognition of the child as someone apart from themselves, they can join in mutual efforts to understand and to aid the young person in being his own best self, to help him learn responsibility for himself and for others.

THIRD, we can work with our community and attempt to provide as many facilities as possible for our sons and daughters. Trying to remember always that our young ones may have handicaps but that they have strengths

and offerings, too, we help them develop their capacity for fun. We aid them to know laughter. We encourage them to undertake as much responsibility as they can.

The story is told of a young man whose older brother became quite wealthy. In fact, in his expansiveness, he bought the younger brother a new and beautiful car. The younger brother drove it to town the first day he had it and parked it. A little newsboy ran up to ask him to buy a paper. Then the newsboy ran one grimy finger over the chrome and said, "Wow, what a wonderful car. Where did you get it?" The owner replied, "My brother gave it to me." The newsboy's mouth opened into a huge O. He touched a fender again, lovingly. "Wow," he repeated, "I'd like *to be* a brother like that."

As adults in this young person's life, we have to be extremely vigilant for the signs that this person needs assistance. We have become increasingly sophisticated about the signs in terms of young children, but we are not always so knowledgeable on behalf of adolescents.

FOURTH, we can encourage a coordinated approach about adolescent development and its impact on handicapping conditions as a first requirement. Active support and encouragement should be generated for doctors and psychologists to specialize in teenage development. There should be greater emphasis on the inclusion of adolescent medicine in undergraduate and house-staff medical training for all doctors. Medical information should be effectively disseminated to teachers, parents, and counselors. Without this coordinated

approach there will be more and more handicapped who remain in a permanent state of adolescence, incapable of reaching their full potential and inadequate to meet the demands of the adult world.

As parents or teachers we develop recognition that this child, as he is, is a one-of-a-kind model of a human being. He is not a mirror image of his father nor a replica of his mother. He is a person with his own capabilities and feelings, his own goals and expectations. If he is burdened by learning disabilities, he may have to modify his own dreams, but at least they are his dreams and not those of his parents.

The statements are simple to make but complex to carry out. It takes parents with unusual maturity and willingness to work for their child's independence to help bring it about.

Parents, teachers, and friends all help the young person who is learning disabled to develop to his own best ability. No one can "make up" to another human being for what he has suffered. No one can stop the gap of disabilities.

As Dr. Viktor Frankl has said, "It is not up to us to ask, 'what is the meaning of my life?' We have to realize that we are the ones who are questioned, questioned by *life*. And it is we who have to answer, by answering for life."⁴

Magnificent examples exist of people who have learned to find meaning in their lives under the greatest of handicaps. Parents also need to learn to live full lives of their own, even as they lend strength to the young

I am certain that the "supergoal" of human institutions, and that includes progress, is not only to protect all those born on earth from excessive suffering and early death but also to preserve in mankind all that is human; the joy of spontaneous work with knowing hands and a knowing mind, the joy of mutual help and of good relations with people and nature, and of the joy of learning and art. I believe that mankind will find a rational solution to the complex problem of realizing the grand, necessary, and inevitable goals of progress without losing the humaneness of humanity and the naturalness of nature.⁶

A psychologist asked a group of minority children in a class situation to imagine themselves at the very top of whatever they could dream of being in their lifetime. She was astonished to discover that the children who were the sons of waiters might imagine themselves as a maitre d' or the son of a railroad worker might imagine himself as a railroad engineer. None of the children was able to fathom that he could be a professional person, a person of high social esteem, or a person in a prestigious profession.

This ability to dream of being greater than one is now is the human characteristic which we should feel responsible for implanting in our learning disabled young people. In one small school where children were asked what they wanted to be, a little boy simply wanted to be "a person." Surely all of our young people who have suffered learning disabilities want to be "a person" in the very highest

sense. Perhaps this is a place where those who are working in the field need to direct the next and best efforts. Life is to be lived fully, whether we struggle with inward difficulties or whether, from outside, we reach toward those who will benefit from our help.

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