

Strategies for Struggling Learners, Part I

Christine Field with Dr. Joe Sutton

Are learning disabilities "God-given"? What an intriguing question. Whether you know or only suspect that your child has a learning issue, most parents are hard pressed to answer the question, "*What do we do now?*" Many options are available, including private tutoring from learning specialists, interventions designed for home use, and partnering with a local school. It is essential that parents make these early decisions wisely and with good counsel. We are fortunate to have as our guest this issue (and next!), Dr. Joe Sutton, a special education consultant, educational diagnostician, and former homeschooler, who will share his best advice and insights with us in a two part series designed just for TOS.

Welcome to The Old Schoolhouse, Dr. Sutton!

TOS: You are uniquely qualified to help homeschoolers. You have a doctorate in special education, state and national certifications in learning disabilities and educational diagnosis, and serve on the executive board of the national Council for Educational Diagnostic Services. How did you come to have a heart for homeschooling families with struggling learners?

Dr. Sutton: In 1989, I completed my doctoral work in special education at the University of Virginia. My first appointed ministry, after leaving UVA, was professor and chair of the Division of Special Education at Bob Jones University, a position I have held for the last 14 years. Soon after transitioning to BJU, one of my colleagues received a notice from Home School Legal Defense Association, inviting doctoral-level professionals in education to serve as consultants and expert witnesses for homeschool families. I cannot fully explain it, but God simply moved on my heart to respond. Since then, I have provided educational testing and consulting services to hundreds of homeschool families who have struggling learners and children with God-given disabilities. In 1991, I founded Exceptional Diagnostics, an educational testing/consulting service for students with learning, attention, and behavioral difficulties and gifted potential. I provide assessments and consults to some 150-200 clients each year, more than 80% of which are homeschoolers. Some of my earliest clients were families who homeschooled struggling learners. Although I was skeptic of the effects of homeschooling in those early years, I have since followed the progress of many homeschooled students with various disabilities through triennial evaluations and have seen first-hand what miracles God can perform through parents who commit to maintaining control of their child's education through homeschooling. Additionally, I began conducting my own research at the university on homeschooled high school graduates who go on to post-secondary education (college). In 1992, my colleague, Dr. Rhonda Galloway and I published the only study of its kind that compares the college success of high school graduates from home schools, private/Christian schools, and public schools. The results were highly in favor of homeschool graduates. My wife and I also homeschooled one of our three sons for a period of time and realized just how effective this educational option is. God has changed my heart and my beliefs about the viability of homeschooling through personal, professional, and spiritual experiences. I am firmly dedicated to serving the educational needs of homeschool families who have struggling learners and children with disabilities.

TOS: Parents typically suspect something when their child shows learning struggles for extended periods of time. What are some general signs parents can look for which might point to a possible God-given disability or impairment in learning?

Dr. Sutton: In the pre-school years, failure to reach developmental milestones (e.g., crawling on all fours, saying one-word phrases, saying three-word phrases, following directions, toileting) in a timely manner may be indicators of potential learning struggles to come. Language, both receptive and expressive, is a significant predictor of future learning success, too. Young children who show weaknesses in communication are highly at-risk for various educational disabilities, including learning disability (LD). In the early elementary years, children who are slow at developing basic reading skills are also candidates for various disabilities.

The "late bloomer" myth circulating among the greater homeschooling community notwithstanding, researchers are now finding that children who do not respond to basic, traditional reading instruction at the age of 6 years and who show signs of not being ready to learn to read at that early age are highly at-risk. Over the last decade, I have had the great opportunity to provide testing/evaluation for many adolescent-age homeschool students whose parents bought into the largely unfounded view that, if your child is not ready to begin learning to read at age 6, then he simply is developmentally behind and just needs more time (years?) to develop. I don't deny the reality of late bloomers, educationally speaking. However, latent development or readiness to learn basic academic skills in young children is not nearly as prevalent as some homeschool proponents suggest and assert. Parents with young children who are struggling to read and acquire other basic academic skills such as spelling and math, should seriously consider testing and evaluation for that child. I would rather err on the side of getting testing done in those early years for a struggling learner, and discovering that, indeed, it may well be a developmental issue, than to defer testing and evaluation on the assumption that my child MAY be a late bloomer, only to find out years down the road that I was dealing with a child who had a God-given disability or impairment all along. The gravity of such negligence is far-reaching in its effects on the child. The truth is, parents can re-cover money spent on testing and assessment, even if the testing results in no diagnosis of disability, but they can never re-capture lost years of instruction. Other symptoms of students who may have potential disabilities such as LD, particularly students who are approaching upper primary and middle-school years, are impulsivity, hyperactivity, inattention, memory recall difficulties, perceptual difficulties, clumsiness, lack of coordination, and immaturity.

It would be good at this point to clarify what we mean by learning "disability." Virtually all students have learning "difficulties" (or "struggles" or "problems" or "challenges") at one time or another during their K-12 years. That's natural. But a learning "disability" is a condition defined in federal law, which means that a student has average to above-average intelligence, yet is underachieving in at least one academic area, which is due primarily to a cognitive processing disorder (i.e., input-output of information processing through visual and/or auditory processing channels of the brain). About 5-6% of the school-age population will have specific learning disabilities. A learning disability can only be confirmed through a comprehensive evaluation (called "psychological" or "psychoeducational" or just "educational" evaluations) by a qualified examiner. The homeschool community will have its share of LD students.

TOS: With personal observations and experiential knowledge of their child's learning, coupled with concerns and suspicions, where can parents turn for professional help?

Dr. Sutton: Once more, only through professional testing and evaluation can disabilities in children be proven and documented. Therefore, home school parents will need the services of a qualified examiner. One ill-advised option is to engage the help of the local public schools. Through the public schools, federal law (Public Law 105-17, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) has guaranteed free testing/evaluation to all students. Even students from conventional private and home schools qualify for free testing/evaluation through the public schools under this federal law. However, HSLDA cautions parents to refrain from availing themselves of this free, government-funded service. The danger centers on a concept referred to as "legal entanglement," according to HSLDA attorney, Scott Somerville. We know that home school parents by and large do not want public educators to claim any ownership of their children, now or ever. Some would view it contradictory or double-minded if home school parents were to entrust their children to the public educators for free testing services, yet reject the instruction (i.e., public education) for their children from those same educators. The best advice for home school parents when it comes to securing professional testing services is to find a qualified private examiner and absorb the cost personally. HSLDA maintains a list of qualified examiners and makes this list available to member families; however, the list is short, and many parents may need to find a more local professional. In my Strategies book, I enumerate five (5) qualifications that parents need to ensure about any examiner they employ. Holding the right credentials is imperative, but the philosophical orientation of the examiner is equally important. A liberal-minded Ph.D. is of little use to homeschool families who have struggling learners, if that examiner ends up accusing or intimating parental neglect/abuse or attempts to persuade the parents to cease and desist from homeschooling, arguing all the while that homeschooling will harm (or continue to harm, or potentially harm) the child.

TOS: What qualifications should homeschool parents look for when searching for a professional examiner?

Dr. Sutton: I have identified five essential qualifications of diagnosticians for homeschool families. Parents must ask and get answers to the following questions: (1) Is the examiner a Bible-believing Christian or at least conservative in his beliefs? (2) Is the examiner home-school friendly, or at least home-school neutral, willing and/or open to the idea of homeschooling, despite any diagnosis of your child that may ensue? (3) Does the examiner hold an advanced degree, that is, a master's degree, preferably a doctorate? (4) Does the examiner hold a state license/certificate, preferably national certification? (5) Is the examiner a member of professional organizations, a good indicator that s/he is on the cutting edge of what research says works best for children who struggle, such as the national Council for Exceptional Children. In truth, few examiners meet all five criteria. Many, if not most, clinicians are servants of the secular-public educational system. Sometimes, homeschool parents will either have to drive a significant distance to connect with a qualified examiner, or they will have to collaborate with other local homeschool families and contract with an examiner for on-site testing.

TOS: Next issue, we'll pick up where we left off and get into more specifics for helping out struggling learners. Thanks for spending some time with The Old Schoolhouse!

Biographical Information

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" . . . I am the harried homeschooler as I seek to play the many roles and meet the many demands in my life."