

Learning Disabilities and Sensory Integration Therapies

By Christine Field

"There is nothing more satisfying than to see a child who thought he couldn't do it, or felt he was dumb or stupid, suddenly find himself reading and learning and succeeding."-ELI

The parent of a learning disabled child who searches for private services can become overwhelmed at the choices available. There are multiple theories and therapies which all promise to address your need. How do we choose? How do we sort out which will be truly beneficial to this particular child with this particular difficulty? It's not easy. We must be wise and discerning. We must do our homework.

The Old Schoolhouse wants to help you sort out the views and the vendors in this arena. While we can't diagnose your child or give a specific learning prescription, we can endeavor to introduce you over the months to some ideas and possibilities.

Several ads in magazines for *Essential Learning Institute* piqued my curiosity. They stated that they could help parents deal with their child's special needs in the home setting. Eager to know more, I contacted them and spoke with Robert Salzman, founder of the company, and Mrs. Faye Westover, Educational Service Director of ELI, and this issue in Resource Room we invite you into our discussion.

TOS: Mr. Salzman, why was your company started?

Mr. Salzman: Essential Learning Institute was founded to help small Christian and private schools and homeschooling families gain access to quality learning disability programs at affordable prices. Most programs available to smaller schools and homeschoolers can be very expensive, costing between ten to fifteen thousand dollars. Either the programs are administered over several years or special schools are established with high additional annual tuitions. Often these programs are no more effective than the special education programs in most school districts. In 1990 Essential Learning Institute decided to invest in several of the best computer-based sensory integration training programs available and set up delivery systems that allowed the individual school or family to access these programs on an individualized basis, thus spreading the cost over many students and lowering the price per client.

Over the years we saw pain and frustration in students and their families as a result of learning problems. Parents tried everything from vitamins and eye training to expensive tutorial programs, usually to no avail. From the moment we started ELI we saw and experienced incredible success both within our Clinic and in our home therapy programs. As an Educational Consultant to private and Christian schools and homeschooling families, I am familiar with virtually everything in the educational marketplace. Tragically, schools and families today are in even worse straits than they were when we began almost 13 years ago. The same educational programs are being administered using the same, ineffective methods as in the past and the LD and at risk student numbers increase every year (54%). This is what caused us to get involved and to keep on through the years. There is nothing more satisfying than to see a child who thought he couldn't do it, or felt he was dumb or stupid, suddenly find himself reading and

learning and succeeding. Seeing students who had given up on themselves, unable to even look the teacher in the eye, now functioning at grade level with the whole world before them is very satisfying! There is nothing like it! We have thirteen successful years working with children, young people and, yes, even adults (25% of our clients are over 18-some as old as 64).

TOS: That is exciting, as more and more homeschoolers are choosing to educate their special needs children at home. Others lack the confidence to do so. What does ELI offer homeschoolers to help them tackle this task?

Mrs. Westover: Our program will allow us to correct the areas of struggle, as well as place the student at the skill level where they can best perform, prescribe a full curriculum from now until graduation, maintain report cards and transcripts as they complete the program, and award an accredited diploma once they complete the requirements for graduation. Our curriculum is designed for independent study and is easily administered. It is an outstanding curriculum that prepares students to succeed after graduation, whether they attend a university or enter the workforce.

TOS: We understand that a learning disability is often a processing difficulty, whether visual processing or auditory processing or both. Can you briefly describe each of these deficits?

Mrs. Westover: To process information, one must first of all make sense of what they see or hear, then process it properly, next store it in memory, and later be able to retrieve it when necessary. Visual processing basically means that the student has difficulty processing what he/she sees and storing it in memory. Auditory processing means that the student has difficulty processing what he/she hears and storing it in memory.

TOS: And these are some of the issues addressed in your program, which involves Sensory Integration Therapy. Can you give us a layman's definition of Sensory Integration Therapy?

Mrs. Westover: Sensory Integration Therapy (SIT) is a series of neurological exercises that interlink the visual, auditory, and motor pathways in the brain in order to aid the implanting of information. In its simplest form, SIT stimulates the brain in one sensory mode, asks for a recall of information from memory using a second sensory mode, and then asks for a response using a third sensory mode. By going through this simple, multi-modality task, correctly sequenced and timed, the brain proceeds to interlock the sensory pathways or "patterns" of neural connections.

The connections that take place during learning increase, and within a matter of minutes following training, new connections are in place. These connections are the basis for memory retention of any skill. Repetition of the skill reinforces it and places it more firmly into long-term memory. SIT provides massive multi-sensory stimulation through simple interlinking sequences to affect this learning process. In this way, the brain is provided with so many positively reinforced and correct neurological stimuli that it proceeds to select proper learning pathways. Learning then takes place easily and fluidly.

TOS: How long does this take - the amount of time per day as well as the expected duration of therapy?

Mrs. Westover: The student works for 45 minutes to 1 hour per day, 4 consecutive days per week, for 9 months or a minimum of 130 sessions.

TOS: Are there certain types of disability for which this therapy is most appropriate? What kinds of kids would NOT benefit from this?

Mrs. Westover: We deal with about 95% of all learning difficulties including visual and auditory processing, ADD, ADHD, and dyslexia. Students with autism, aspergers, and ODD are enrolled with discretion.

TOS: You also offer complete curriculum for students in your program. Can you tell us about that?

Mrs. Westover: In addition to the sensory integration therapy, we have many different individualized curriculums available including self-instructional textbooks, interactive CDs, and online curriculum. The self-paced, individualized curriculum usually works best for struggling students because it assures mastery before proceeding to higher levels. It has been carefully compiled to introduce children to concrete and abstract reasoning skills at appropriate age levels. Vocabulary has been meticulously chosen to spiral from simple to complex, and from concrete to abstract. Character traits such as honesty, kindness, and loyalty are woven throughout the curriculum.

Parents can be assured of 1) a solid, back to basics education, 2) a course of study individualized to meet a child's specific needs and learning capabilities, 3) a program incorporating character-building and wisdom principles, and 4) a curriculum using advanced computer technology to help ensure the finest education possible in today's high-tech society.

Because every struggling student has individual needs, following a proper assessment, we select from a variety of curriculum. We generally choose an individualized, self instructional, mastery based curriculum such as the Accelerated Christian Education, Inc. publications. We also have a number of other vendors we pick and choose from.

TOS: I want to thank you both for sharing with our readers about your program. Your website, www.ldhope.com, is full of informative articles about learning disabilities, as well as complete coverage of your program and pricing.

This is one approach to dealing with learning disabilities in the home. Parents of differently-abled children have many resources from which to choose. Over the months in this Resource Room feature of The Old Schoolhouse, we hope to bring you solid information on what is available to help you make an informed choice. The presence of a particular company or approach in this column does not mean it is endorsed or recommended by TOS. The course of therapy is an individualized decision for parents and must be entered into with great thought, research and prayer. Our goal is to equip you with information to help you make informed choices.

Until next time, press on.... and happy researching!-Christine

Biographical Information

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To contact Essential Learning Institute, call 800-285-9089, or write for a packet of information to: ELI, 334 2nd St., Catasauqua PA 18032. Their email address is eli@polyweb.net and they are on the web at <http://www.ldhope.com>.

Christine M. Field practiced law for eight years before becoming a full-time mommy. She and her husband live and homeschool their four children in Wheaton, Illinois, where her husband serves as chief of police. Three of their four children are adopted: one through private adoption and two from Korea. As special needs expert columnist of TOS Magazine's Resource Room, Christine welcomes readers' comments, personal stories, and questions. Please contact Christine at RR@TOSMag.com. As the author of books Help For the Harried Homeschooler, A Field Guide to Home Schooling, Coming Home to Raise Your Children, Should You Adopt? and Life Skills for Kids, Christine is a ready and willing help to the homeschooling community. Crosswalk.com has featured her a number of times as have other publications. For more information on Christine and her resources please visit her website: www.homefieldadvantage.org.

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