

# LEARNING DISORDER OR LEARNING STYLE?

## A Timeless Perspective

"I think I might be raising a narcissist." The statement came from a dad sitting in a room full of parents of middle school students. Heads were nodding everywhere as he continued. "She's so self-absorbed and thinks her mother and I know absolutely nothing." Another parent raised her hand, "My son has real attention issues—at least in school. He sure can focus on his video games, texting and Facebook friends, but he can't listen for even a couple minutes in class." By now, several more parents were eager to contribute to the discussion. What about eating disorders? How about the uptick in autism? What if your child displays signs of oppositional defiant disorder?

I have to admit, I felt a bit disappointed. My colleague and I were there to talk to parents about how their children can succeed and thrive in school, but the audience already seemed to think their kids were suffering from any number of neurological and learning-oriented disorders. There was an overwhelming sense of loss of control over their circumstances—after all, how can you argue with the symptoms of learning disabilities or mental illness?

We asked everyone to take a deep breath, step back, and start over. Before anyone decides there is something wrong with his or her child, should we not take a look at what is known about individual strengths and needs? And before we accept a label for a child, should we not be aware of how many reasons there might be for a lack of success in school?

CYNTHIA ULRICH TOBIAS

For the next 90 minutes or so, we talked to this concerned group about three things I wish teachers and counselors could tell every parent:

### **1. Few people want to be analyzed, but everyone wants to be understood—and therein lies a big difference.**

No one fits into categories or boxes—and no test exists that can accurately pinpoint exactly what a person "is." We are fearfully and wonderfully made, full of many puzzle pieces of various sizes. When it comes to individual learning strengths and character traits, every person has some portion of almost every piece, and there have never been two people exactly alike since time began. You will never be able to confidently say, "Oh, my child is a \_\_\_\_\_."

Still, it is good to recognize patterns and identify strengths and learning styles—the inborn strengths in each of us that determine how we learn, remember and make decisions about information gives us a great way to do that. I am not talking about psychological terms or complex mental health issues, but instead about a fundamental framework that helps us understand and appreciate how many ways there are for a person to learn.

This process is something you can discern much more effectively through observation and conversation than you can through a formal test. It is based on two or three solid, empirical research models coupled with your ability and willingness to ask and answer the question, "What's the point?" ...



and then find how many ways there might be to get there.

Here are a few facts from just one of those models to get you started:

**Auditory learners need to talk.** Their lives are filled with words, whether spoken out loud or in their heads. Words, and how they are verbalized, mean a lot. If you want to get the attention of auditory learners, lower and modulate your voice. Stay calm and ask questions—then allow them time to talk to you while you actually listen. They remember best when they can process verbally, and their multiple interruptions may indicate they are getting the point, not just being inattentive.

**Visual learners need to see.** While it often seems they are simply uncommunicative, it may be largely due to the fact they do not feel the need to talk in order to communicate. There are so many other, more visual, means—pictures, notes, nonverbal language. Sometimes these children are so busy trying to picture what is being said that they forget to respond. If you only judge them by what they verbally communicate, you may not know even half of what they are thinking.

**Kinesthetic learners need to move and do.** It becomes increasingly difficult for kinesthetic learners to listen while sitting or standing in one place. You might be giving the best advice in the world, but if sitting still is required to hear it, kinesthetic listeners are often left behind in the process. If you want them to keep track of what is being said, keep them moving, even in small ways. What could be considered “hyper” activity may, in fact, diminish considerably when their movements are incorporated into the learning environment.

Regardless of their learning styles, children should understand the need for accountability. We must carefully identify the bottom line and then give them some direction on how to get there.

## **2. Awareness is half the battle.**

It is surprising what a difference it makes when we look at children through the perspective of how different they are from us. As I do live seminars, I have participants compare their learning style profile with those around them. When I ask how many have answers that are different from their neighbors, most hands go up. Then I ask,

No one fits into categories or boxes—and no test exists that can accurately pinpoint exactly what a person “is.” We are fearfully and wonderfully made, full of many puzzle pieces of various sizes.

“So which one of you is normal?” The response is usually only sheepish laughter.

There are some questions worth debating: Who gets to decide what’s normal? Who decided that in order to be considered attentive you have to sit still and look at the person who is talking to you? Why do so many of us get hired for all the traits that got us in trouble when we were in school? What if we are often medicating our children to conform to classrooms and educational systems that are largely irrelevant after they graduate?

### 3. How our children need us always changes... the fact that they do need us never changes.

There is no question that younger children need their parents in very different ways than adolescents. However, one discovery I made with my own sons was that they needed me almost more in high school than they did in elementary school. They definitely did not want me to hover over them or interfere, but they counted on my presence and support and wanted me to be involved in their lives. It’s true that I don’t have the same technological savvy they do, and I certainly have not kept up with all the current trends in fashion, music and video. Nevertheless, I have stayed solidly consistent in my love for them, and they know they can count on me.

Parents need more reminders about how important they are in their children’s lives. They need to remember how critical it is to focus on their children’s strengths and encourage them to figure out how to use those strengths to cope with difficult and challenging situations. This takes a little time and effort, but moms and dads need to understand that even when medication and professional intervention are necessary, as parents they are still a critical part of their children’s success. They cannot simply hand over the well-being of their

children to a third party, no matter how professionally trained that person may be. In the end, it is the love and support of a parent that children of any age crave the most.

### Conclusion

If a child is diagnosed with a learning disorder, parents should always seek a second opinion. It is important that those who know the child best understand which symptoms are a matter of learning style and which indicate more extreme issues.

When it comes to our children, no matter how much the world changes, no matter how many new cultural trends come and go, no matter what medication or therapy appears and then disappears, there are a few key things a parent can provide that there will never be a substitute for: time spent with them, love shown to them, patience in dealing with them, coping strategies taught to them, encouragement given to them, and prayer with them and on their behalf.

In all cases, we need to urge parents to remember there are no shortcuts when it comes to raising children. There is no doubt children often have different ideas than we do—on almost everything—however; not every behavioral nuance should be labeled as a “disorder.” After all, how can you change the world if you are just like everyone else? ✦



CYNTHIA ULRICH TOBIAS, M.ED., is a best-selling author, featured guest on radio and television, and a popular presenter for businesses, government agencies, churches and schools throughout the United States and around the world. She has a successful background that includes more than 25 years of private practice, eight years of teaching high school, and six years in law enforcement. For more information, visit her at [CynthiaTobias.com](http://CynthiaTobias.com).

