

This month
is Learning
Disabilities
Month

Learning

Disabilities

What are learning disabilities? They are not mental handicaps because the people that have learning disabilities are at least average, if not above average, in intelligence. Furthermore, the learning disabled are encountered so pervasively in the world that one may question as to whether these people really have dysfunctional information-processing systems, or that rather they simply have unique modes of perception.

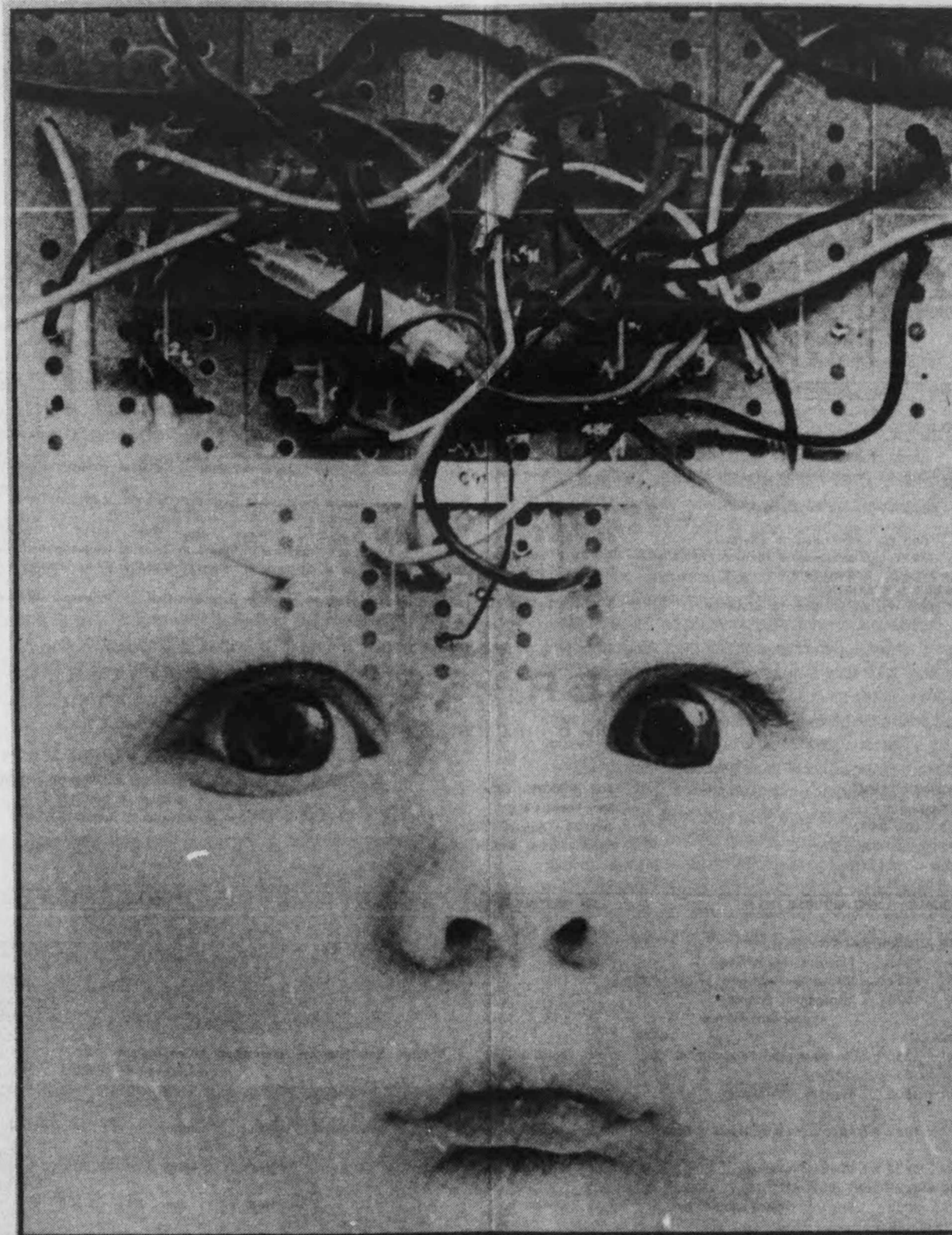
In the past, the methods for educating our young were in their very rudiments. Those who first undertook the official role of "the teacher" taught concepts in the same manner in which they understood them to operate. They probably had many things to discover about the mind's plasticity. They probably marvelled at the infinite ways in which children were able to solve problems.

Vast amounts of research is now done on learning. It is somewhat ironic that we must gain knowledge about something that we, as humans, seem to do so naturally. Yet we feel compelled to find out more about the multitudes of idiosyncrosities that people have in their manner of learning. Perhaps in this endeavor we will be able to reach the children when they are still young, and then gear the educational system towards them, and not vice versa.

Learning Disabilities - The Invisible Disabilities

by Gail Tucker

Today more than ever before, society acknowledges, accepts, and accommodates mentally and physically challenged individuals. As we embrace these people with acceptance and understanding, we are acknowledging the "individuality" of people. No two people are alike. We are not clones. Unfortunately, a segment of the population struggles for acceptance and credibility. These people are coping with an 'invisible' handicap. Their central nervous system, for various reasons, is dysfunctional, leaving them with processing difficulties. The number of learning disabilities are too numerous to name in this article but the effects of the disability is often unbearable for the victim. Research reveals that people with learning disabilities have average or above average intelligence and it is estimated that 10% of the population have a learning disability. These people - children and adults - can learn but they learn differently from the majority of the population. To learn how they learn or process information they need accurate assessments that will determine not only the particular learning disability but a strategy that assists them in learning. In our educational system dehumanizing labels are often attached to the students, such as "lazy, non-motivated, stupid". Students struggle day in and day out not only with the feelings of being 'different' but also with the burden of the labels. They become frustrated, angry and embarrassed after continuous attempts on their part to learn. What should be a rewarding experience becomes a prison sentence; learning becomes a negative experience. Teachers insist that these students can do better if they apply themselves, so more pressure is put on both the student and parents to produce the desired level of achievement. Because frustration and embarrassment often lead to inappropriate behaviour, attention becomes focused on the behaviour instead of the root problem. Many students give up and drop out. Others persist but with negative side-effects such as low self-esteem and a negative attitude towards learning. Their potential is never realized because the learning process has been stifled in



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school.

Employers struggle with the attitudes of some of their employees, not realizing at the basis of the problem is an individual who has a handicap that has never been seen.

The Learning Disabilities Association of New Brunswick continues to advocate and assist people with learning disabilities to seek appropriate help. A learning disability need not hamper people from achieving their goals. Many figures in history, such as Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill, Thomas Edison had learning disabilities and yet their contribution to mankind has been invaluable.

Early diagnosis and intervention is crucial. Parents must insist that their children who are struggling receive the necessary assessment. Adults who have struggled with an "invisible handicap" can be appropriately assessed and can achieve success.

This "invisible handicap" - learning disabilities - is a real handicap, affecting real people, causing real damage. Although there is not a cure, there is help to enable people to live productive, fulfilling lives.

What can we do?

by Martin A. Kernan and
Karen-Jean Braun

What do Henry Winkler, Albert Einstein and Benjamin Franklin have in common? Winkler, a talented Shakespearean actor and star of "Happy Days" (The Fonz) was labelled "stupid" and "lazy" throughout his years at school. He is now a successful Hollywood producer. Einstein was slow to begin speaking and was nearly five years old before he learned to tie his shoes. This man who discovered the theory of relativity was nearly expelled from university for a poor academic performance. Benjamin Franklin, a well known inventor, had difficulty learning to read and write.

What these men shared was a learning disability. Learning disabilities are more common than most people would suspect. It is estimated that 1 in 10 people suffer from some form of learning disorder. One in 100 students make it through primary and secondary school and enrol in university before they are diagnosed as learning disabled.

In this information-dependant society, most forms of communication center on the written word. This makes it extremely difficult for a person with a learning disorder to function. Because individuals with learning disabilities are not necessarily confined to wheelchairs or do not carry white canes, their disability makes them invisible at home, at school, in the workplace, and in their personal lives. Try ordering a hamburger at McDonald's when you can't read. Try looking up a number in the phone book, or negotiating with a salesperson after you have been shortchanged. Try filling out a job application, or a tax

return, or a multiple choice exam. Try writing a 2000 word essay. Try looking up a word in the dictionary. Find a library book. Read a map. Try to follow any written instructions involved with assembled projects, or play a game. Try to follow a recipe, or read a child a bedtime story. Try grocery shopping and see how many mystery cans you come home with.

People with learning disabilities are not stupid, or lazy, although they are often thought so by their parents, teachers and employers; they do not lack motivation, or self-discipline. As the examples above might suggest, many people with learning disabilities are bright and highly intelligent. That some make it to university or tradeschool attests to their ingenuity when it comes to developing coping skills. Most people with learning disabilities never make it through high school and have fallen through the cracks of the educational system long before that. Some end up in the penal system; 80% of prison inmates cannot read or write and display some sort of learning disability.

The problem is that most learning disabilities go unrecognized by parents, teachers and employers. Many a parent has scratched his or her head at the child who can fix a lawnmower, but cannot seem to master the alphabet. Most teachers have had students who seemed bright enough but who could not

complete their schoolwork or fall behind their less talented classmates regardless of the hours spent doing remedial work. Many a professor on this campus have puzzled over the student who attends every lecture, participates eloquently in class discussion and who obviously understands the material that has been presented, but whose written work seems to have been mysteriously produced by the student's 8 year old sibling or has been proofread by the family dog.

Learning disabilities can be congenital or may stem from injuries sustained in a difficult birth. Occasionally, they are the result of early childhood illness. Unlike measles, however, learning disabilities do not go away. They are permanent. But just because they cannot be cured does not mean that there are not ways in which they can be overcome by the individual, by parents, and educators. There are ways in which academic weaknesses may be compensated for by building on the learning disabled student's unique strengths. These methods may sometimes require a little money, and often a bit of time, but the most important ingredient, creativity, is free. This creativity can be used in devising curriculum strategies and flexibility in lesson planning.

There is much that parents can do in assisting the learning disabled child to acquire the coping skills necessary to survive in the classroom and to facilitate learning. For example, parents of the learning disabled child can offer support, understanding and patience. Parents know their child better than anyone else and often suspect the presence of a learning disability long before the child is actually diagnosed. Parents often face difficulty with medical and school officials in getting the treatment and assistance that their child needs. The most important message for parents is not to give up. Parents must advocate on behalf of their learning disabled child and ensure that their child's special needs are met by members of the medical community and by school officials.

Teachers can assist the learning disabled child by communicating with parents and by learning as much as they can about the nature of learning disabilities and the various ways such conditions manifest themselves. Teachers must familiarize themselves with the services available and must be willing to make referrals and advocate on behalf of their learning disabled students. Schools can help by testing students and by offering alternate methods of classroom instruction. For example, a student who has difficulty with reading could be assisted by having course material taped. The student who has difficulty writing could be examined orally, and/or provided with a special setting or equipment to allow the student to complete assignments and examinations. All that some learning disabled students require is additional time.

While all of the above can help the learning disabled child or adult, what is needed most is a change in attitude. In the words of Albert Einstein, "Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds."

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