

Developing Minds

Summer 2006

The Pediatrician's Role in the Detection of School Problems

Physicians are uniquely positioned and trained to identify developmental variations in learning. Learning disorders are common, yet many children are not identified as having learning difficulties until later in life. According to the National Institute of Health, learning disabilities affect one in every seven people. The percentage of children who struggle at school is even higher when conditions like ADHD are considered. It was shown in another recent NIH study, that 67 percent of young students identified as being at risk for reading difficulties were able to achieve average or above average reading ability when they received early help. Clearly, pediatricians need to be especially vigilant since early treatment can make an important difference in a child's life.

It is easy to assume that teachers will identify students with learning difficulties, but the reality is that diagnostic-prescriptive reasoning is not a typical part of teacher training. Teachers do not always know how to identify possible problems and devise treatment plans. Also, teachers work in large groups. Physicians have the advantage of monitoring the same child from year to year and thus acquire a rich knowledge of developmental, medical and family histories. They can also consider social and demographic risk factors that put a child at risk for learning difficulties (e.g. parental mental health problems, low parental education, single parent status, more than three children, and multiple stressful family events).

Physicians often fail to recognize the valuable role that they can play in the detection of learning disabilities. Only 15-25% of pediatricians routinely use screening instruments to detect developmental variations and only a few of these tools address the needs of the young school-aged child. Most physicians rely instead only on clinical judgment. Unfortunately, research on clinical judgment suggests it identifies less than half the children with mild mental retardation, language impairment, learning disabilities or serious emotional/behavioral disturbance – the four most common types of disabilities.

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Child Development Chat

The last Tuesday of every month, parents may join Damon Korb, M.D., and other clinicians, in an informal and interactive discussion where topics including child behavior, development concerns and parenting questions will be discussed. Free of charge.

Periodically, the chat session will focus on a specific area of interest:

The Impact of Attention on Learning

October 31, 12:30pm

The Disorganized Student

January 30, 12:30 pm

Lectures to Note

Upcoming presentations by Dr. Korb include:

"Early Identification of Learning Disorders"

September 6

Good Samaritan Medical Center,

September 19

Regional Medical Center of San Jose.

"Identifying and Dealing with Early School Problems"

October 9 & 10

American Academy of Pediatrics Annual National Conference, Atlanta, Georgia.

Please see our website for more details on each of these events.



Pediatric expertise in child behavior, development & learning
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To improve screening in clinical practice, physicians should routinely request to see their patients' scores on the group achievement tests taken annually at school. Currently used group achievement tests include the California Achievement Test, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, and the Stanford Achievement Test. Each test provides a percentile and a stanine per subtest. Stanines are the most helpful statistic for screening because they divide the typical distribution (bell curve) into nine equal parts. Children who receive scores in stanines 1-3 will most likely struggle in the classroom. But, it is important to note that even students who score in the upper stanines may have learning issues. Physicians should review each subtest score, because children who have variations between scores are also at risk for learning problems. Stanines 2 through 8 each account for one-half of a standard deviation. Any child whose stanines on individual subtests (e.g. reading, language or math) differ by more than two standard deviations has a statistically significant test score scatter.

Another excellent screening instrument that can be used in pediatric offices is the Parents' Evaluation of Developmental Status (PEDS). PEDS is an evidenced-based surveillance tool that elicits parents' concerns. It is quick, reliable, and has been statistically shown to improve identification of learning difficulties.

Identified children should be referred to the school or a private clinician for more testing. Whenever the results of testing do not seem to make sense to the physician, they should trust their clinical judgment and seek out professional help until they have obtained a satisfactory result. The earlier a child can learn techniques that accommodate their learning difficulties, the sooner they will find success.

How should physicians advise parents if they suspect a learning problem?

- Reassure parents that development is malleable and encourage them to take immediate management of a child's issue.
- Become familiar with local resources available to patients – school counselors, therapists, speech and language specialists, and educational psychologists.
- Empower the family to find the source of the child's struggle at school – early diagnosis is critical for future success.

Ask the Clinician

Q: Our son is 16 and has struggled with severe learning disabilities all of his life. He is interested in becoming a teacher and is great with kids, but we don't think he can manage the school required to get a credential. On the one hand we want to encourage him to pursue his dreams, but on the other hand we want him to be realistic. How do we balance the two? He has had so many disappointments in his life.

A: Your question gives us an opportunity to address the role of a parent. All parents should:

- Offer their children a variety of learning experiences. These opportunities not only expand a child's understanding of the world, but they also assist a child in learning more about themselves.
- Protect children from unnecessary harm. We chose the word 'unnecessary' because parents must be careful to not be overprotective. Children need to fall down and scrape their knees every once in a while.. Learning to overcome their own struggles early in life builds confidence in their ability to work through problems as they falter later in life.
- Provide unconditional love and emotional support. Parents should do whatever it takes to let their children know that they are loved. When helping children to understand that they are unconditionally loved, parents should tell their children that they are wonderful ten times more than they scold or correct them.

Keeping these principles in mind, your son's learning disability should not influence how you deal with him. You should encourage and support your son, exposing him to opportunities to learn more about his area of interest. This will both prepare him for the experience and help him to understand what it will take to become a teacher. For instance, he could volunteer as a summer school teacher's aid, work as a counselor at a summer camp or become a coaching assistant. These opportunities will gradually introduce him to the responsibilities of becoming a teacher. Eventually, he will have to decide for himself if the pathway to becoming a teacher is too rigorous. Prepare him to make an informed decision, but do not try to protect him from this determination. Making the decision for himself will serve as an important life-lesson in self-discovery.

Services at the Center for Developing Minds

The Center for Developing Minds (CDM) offers a wide array of assessments and services to address the educational, behavioral and developmental needs of children and their families. Clinicians at the CDM craft their understanding of a child's neurodevelopmental functions based on focused behavioral observations of the child, developmental screenings and skilled interviews of both the child and his or her family. We create individual treatment plans that may encompass medical, behavioral and educational accommodations and therapies.

Given that every child is unique, the evaluation that we provide is tailored specifically for each child. Our office manager will assist in scheduling the most appropriate assessment for your child. Frequently, families participate in an introductory 90-minute session with Dr. Korb, who will determine if specific follow-up testing would be beneficial.

Behavioral Assessments

We help parents to understand the underlying cause of their child's behavior and develop appropriate treatment plans to support families. Behavioral evaluations at the CDM vary for each child, but can include various combinations of the following:

- Detailed interviews.
- Structured and informal play sessions.
- Classroom observations.
- Detailed assessments of the parent-child interaction, which can take place at the CDM or in the child's home.

Developmental Assessments

We determine if a child has a delay or a typical variation in the pattern of their development. To make this determination we offer the following services:

- Interviews and informal play sessions.
- Developmental testing using instruments nationally accepted as the "gold standard" for childhood assessments.
- Diagnostic assessments of pervasive developmental disorders, such as autism.

Learning Assessments

We combine medical and psychological approaches to detect developmental variations in learning. We provide detailed learning evaluations and treatment plans. We also help parents to work with schools so that their child achieves optimal services.

- Licensed psychological testing of cognition and academic abilities.
- Classroom observations.
- Neurodevelopmental assessments of a child's strengths and weaknesses within the learning process.
- Educational advocacy.

Mental Health Services

We offer counseling services and expert psychopharmacological management.

- Child and family therapy.
- Medication management for children with neurodevelopmental and psychological disorders, such as attention deficits, depression, anxiety, obsessions and compulsions, tics and limited impulse control.

New CDM Staff

**Melissa Ortiz, M.S.,
M.A., LEP**
Educational Psychologist
School Psychologist

Melissa Ortiz works with patients at the Center for Developing Minds to assess their unique learning styles and create recommendations for children with learning differences. She educates parents on special education law and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act rights and procedures. Ms. Ortiz also does school-based observations of students in their natural educational environment.

Liza Stevens, Psy.D.
Clinical Psychologist

Dr. Liza Stevens is a licensed clinical psychologist who specializes in working with children, adolescents and families. She conducts developmental, educational and psychological assessments for children ages 18 months to 18 years. Dr. Stevens provides behavioral and family consultation, develops behavioral support plans, and consults with schools and education teams. She is also trained to conduct individual therapy in ASL (American Sign Language) with deaf and hard-of-hearing clients.

Another area of Dr. Steven's expertise is evaluating and treating children who have autism. She works with Dr. Korb to provide families with a thorough assessment as well as treatment recommendations.



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CME Course on Behavioral and Developmental Pediatrics

The first continuing education program for primary-care physicians at the Center for Developing Minds has been a wonderful success. Dr. Damon Korb, director of the Center for Developing Minds, moderates a group of twelve community primary care providers who meet every other month to discuss the behavioral and developmental challenges of their practice. Each session is highlighted by a lecture from a local expert on a topic of their choice. Topics in this introductory year have included:

- *Social Cognitive Deficits*, Michelle Garcia Winner, SLP, Director of the Center for Social Thinking,
- *Educational Advocacy*, Loni Allen, Educational Resource Specialist at Parents Helping Parents,
- *Self-Injury*, Andrea Ancha, Ph.D.,
- *Medical Management of Attention Dysfunctions*, Damon Korb, MD.

This unique program has received “superior ratings” from its participants. One clinician commented that “It is unlike any other CME program – the small group setting with consistent participants enables everyone to interact comfortably with their colleagues.”

To reserve a spot for the next course, which begins in January, 2007, please contact the Center for Developing Minds.

The Center for Developing Minds
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