

Maintaining your child's self-esteem when faced with a learning challenge

by Monica Ho Ehlers

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In last month's article, "Children and learning disabilities", we explored how to go about getting an evaluation for children who might have a learning issue.

It was established that it can be a frustrating and overwhelming process for parents, but imagine what it might be like for children who have to visit with throngs of doctors, specialists, educators and evaluators—many of whom they have never met.

It is important to keep in mind that it is the child who struggles on a daily basis in school. She is the person wondering why she finds schoolwork so difficult when many of her classmates do not.

Getting the evaluation

During the evaluation process, it is important to talk to your child about what will take place.

"At some level, children know when they are struggling. It's good to walk them through what the specialist is going to do," explained Mary Cravalho, a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist who practices in San Mateo.

"Children like to know what comes next and what to expect instead of being surprised. It's okay to tell children that there are a lot of people that can help them. You might ask a child (who is at least seven years old), 'What does having a learning difference mean to you?'" she suggested.

Try to involve your child in the evaluation procedure as much as possible. For instance, give them the person's name and let them choose the time and day of the appointment. That way they will feel some control over some of the process.

"In children's minds, they have so many activities. They may have homework and things that already stress them out," added Cravalho, who has three school-age children of her own. "If you know the person who is doing the evaluation, you might say, 'They are really kind and funny' or something else that will help your child to be more at ease."

Dealing with the diagnosis

If or when your child receives a diagnosis, Cravalho suggests being as straightforward as possible when discussing it with him.

"Parents shouldn't approach a learning challenge as a child lacking something. They are whole. How many of us don't have different capabilities? This is the time to focus on their different strengths as well as areas that need to be worked on.

You might want to say, 'Let's go over what this person thought. You tell me what you think is accurate.' Break the dialogue down into what you think your child can understand. Process it with them and ask them what it is like for them to have this information.

What worries do they have about it? What do they want people to know and what don't they want people to know? How do they want to handle this? This would include parents discussing the issue with other parents."

A plan for success

It is hard for parents to watch their kids face difficulties, but Cravalho advises otherwise.

“As parents we need to step back and let them struggle. We have to have faith that they do have their own way to handle things. Allow them to open the door of communication to you. Remember it’s all about the kids. When our children come to us, as parents we have the tendency to talk and give advice to try to fix things.

She encourages parents to use the 90/10 rule while talking and brainstorming with your child.

“Listen 90 percent of the time and talk 10 percent and you will strengthen your relationship with your children. We have to trust that they do have some answers.

“I am amazed at the wisdom that children possess at such a young age. Even a five year old has a lot of wisdom on how people might be able to help him. You just need to ask and work on it together.

When safety or self-esteem is involved, you may want to ask your child, ‘What do you think if I take this action?’ Prepare her for what you are about to do and then come back and tell her. Close the communication loop by following through and reporting back.”

Lastly, encourage everyone who works with your child to communicate. However, be very clear about what can be shared and what is off limits

“We need to come in with a more holistic approach about communication,” Cravalho continued.

“One thing I run into is when a tutor, therapist or psychologist is working with a child, parents frequently ask you not to consult with the school. Why not try to connect with the principal or the teacher and make a plan together?”

I’ve seen a lot of movement when everyone that is in a child’s life talks.”

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Side Bar:

According to the Coordinate Campaign for Learning Disabilities (1999) as posted on the ldonline.com, here are some ideas to help foster self-esteem in your child:

Help your child feel special and appreciated. Set aside “special time” during the week alone with each child. With younger children, a parent could say, “When I read to you or play with you, I won’t even answer the phone if it rings.” During these special times, focus on things that your child enjoys doing so that he has the opportunity to relax and display his strengths.

Avoid comments that are judgmental. Try to frame them in more positive terms. For example, instead of saying, “Try harder and put in more of an effort,” say, “We have to figure out better strategies to help you learn.” Children are less defensive when the problem is presented as strategies that must be changed rather than saying that it is their lack of motivation. This can also help with problem-solving skills.

Provide opportunities for children to help. Children love to help others. Providing opportunities for children to do so is a very concrete way of displaying their “islands of competence” and highlighting that they have something

to offer their world. Involving children in charitable work is just one example. Helping others certainly boosts their self-esteem.

Do not compare siblings. It is important not to compare siblings and to highlight the strengths of all children in the family.

More information on self-esteem and learning issues can be found at www.ldonline.com