A Slow Learner may be called dull normal, low normal, or borderline retarded. But we prefer the term Slow Learner. About 1 out of 5 children are Slow Learners. They often are delayed in walking or talking. Most Slow Learners are born with the problem. Severe head injuries, meningitis, or the mother’s use of alcohol or cocaine during the pregnancy can cause a child to become a Slow Learner.

Unfortunately these children are often “overlooked” since they do not have a Learning Disability and are not Mentally Retarded.

A Learning Disability is defined as a child who is not performing to their level of intelligence. Special Education services are provided for Learning Disabled children under the Public Law PL 94-142 (The Handicap Children Act) and the 1992 IDEA (The Individual Disabilities Education Act).

For example, if a child’s IQ is 100 but their reading level (on an individual achievement test) is 80, then they have a Reading Learning Disability. They are reading 20 points below their IQ and they qualify for Resource help. But a Slow Learner may have an IQ of 80 and read at a level of 80. The child has a reading problem but they do not have a Learning Disability. They are working to the best of their ability. A Slow Learner, unfortunately, does not qualify for help under current law.

However, The Rehabilitation Act of 1993 Section 504 may help some Slow Learners to receive resource help from the school.

IQ tests are not the only reason to diagnose a child as a Slow Learner. Their achievement scores, grades, teacher ratings, psychologist’s report, and doctor’s exam are just as important.

Most Slow Learners grow up to work in skilled or semiskilled jobs such as construction or office work. Unfortunately, because school is so hard for them, many of these children drop out of high school.

Slow Learners may have problems not only with math and reading but also with coordination such as penmanship, sports, or dressing. Often they are quiet and shy, and they have trouble making friends. They may have a poor self confidence. They have trouble with abstract thinking such as in social studies or doing math word problems. They often have a short attention span. All of these problems cause them to have a poor self esteem.
How do we help?

Many Slow Learners fail in school. This leads to two choices, neither of which are great. The child will be socially promoted to the next grade or they will be retained. Some Slow Learners are fortunate enough to be placed in resource for math and reading. But the child still struggles in science, geography, and social studies.

• A Slow Learner might repeat one grade level for academic or social reasons. Repeating more than one grade is a disaster for their self esteem.

• Some schools will place these children in a “slow track” where the work is easier. However, the other students may make fun of them. And the concepts in math and social studies may still be too difficult for them.

• The least desirable alternative is a non-graded program where the child works at their own pace and is graded for their effort.

• Another way is to use their IQ to compute a passing grade. For example if passing is 70% and their IQ is 80 then a passing grade would be \(0.8 \times 70 = 56\%\).

• The child deserves pre-vocational training in social skills and independent living. These children should be taught life-related courses like shopping, managing money, and job preparation.

• Look at their problem areas and focus on them with extra tutorial help. This could be during the last period of the day or after school. Allow by-pass strategies such as calculators, or let them do oral or visual reports.

• High school opens the door to vocational training where they often excel. Work study programs give them a purpose for going to school.

• Work with your school’s M-Team (Management Team) to develop an IEP (Individual Educational Plan) for your child.

• Do not spend all the child’s time making them study. Don’t nag. Let them have a life outside of school with activities they enjoy.

Resources

Memphis City Schools
Dept. of Special Education
Support Team (S-Team)
325-5600

Shelby County Schools
458-7561

Tennessee Advocacy Inc.
(901) 458-6013

Mississippi Advocacy
5330 Executive #A
Jackson, MS
981-8207
(800) 772-4057

Arkansas Advocacy
Little Rock, AR
501-296-1775
800-485-1775

Alabama Advocacy
526 Martha Parham West
P.O. Box 870395
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487
(800) 826-1675
(205) 826-1675

Written by Don Eastmead, M.D. & edited by Drew Eastmead June 2004