

Introduction



Strengths-Based Learning

Just as there are always two sides to every story, science and research show us there are two working sides to the brain that impact learning: the left brain specialties and the right brain specialties. Schools use a scope and sequenceⁱ that favors the strengths and gifts of a left-brained dominant person,ⁱⁱ which works well for these learners. Here's a small sample:

- ❖ Schools instruct in a sequential manner, such as learning addition and multiplication in the younger years. This then prepares students to learn algebra and geometry when they're older (see Chapter Seven).

The Right Side of Normal

- ❖ Schools are product-driven. This is why they have children create physical work (products) that they can sort and classify based on right and wrong answers, completed tasks, and definable measurements. The focus is on *what* is learned (see Chapter Nine).
- ❖ Schools are word- and symbol-focused. This is why they pursue early reading acquisition, math fact drilling, and handwriting practice (see Chapter Seven).

Right-brained dominant people² learn in a completely opposite manner. Here's a small sample:

- ❖ Right-brained people learn best in a global, big picture manner, allowing them to experiment with the bigger ideas, such as algebra and geometry, in the younger years. This then motivates them to learn the detailed tasks, such as math facts, when they're older (see Chapter Seven).
- ❖ Right-brained people are process-driven. This is why they enjoy projects that utilize experimentation, creativity, and/or exploration. It's the act of discovery, innovation, and knowing *why* something works that drives learning (see Chapter Nine).
- ❖ Right-brained people are picture-focused. They learn best with visual, pictorial, mental work that encourages mental visualization, such as read-alouds, mental math activities, and/or an oral history documentary (see Chapter Seven).

The school environment doesn't work well for these learners. It's time to tell the other side of the learning story and introduce a scope and sequence that honors the right-brained process and the people who use it.

Right-brained children learn in a completely different manner than their left-brained peers.

Because most of us were schooled in a left-brained manner, we learned to value left-brained traits, too. If we have right-brained children, though, we'll soon notice they do things differently. For instance:



- Do you hear your child say “this is stupid,” or constantly question why they are asked to do something?
- Do math facts not come easily to your child, or is your child a “late reader?”
- Does your child provide answers on his homework, but can’t explain how he got them, or does your child have trouble “showing his work?”
- Does your child occupy himself with something like building with LEGO®, drawing, or playing while you read aloud to him?
- Does your child watch TV or listen to music while doing his homework, or does your child doodle on his homework?
- Does your child have trouble completing tasks or keeping track of homework, or do people say your child daydreams instead of concentrating?
- Does your child struggle with spelling, have difficulty putting together a legible sentence, resist handwriting or have difficulty with it?

The Right Side of Normal



Listening to music helps a right-brained child better concentrate.

Or, alternatively:

- Does your child have a knack for current technology?
- Does your child go on and on telling stories, or does your child enjoy dressing up in interesting costumes or creating complicated play scenarios?
- Does your child spend hours doing one of the following: computers/video games, cooking/gardening, music/dance, building/electronics, art/photography, fashion/sewing, puzzles/mazes, math/numbers, or theater/ showmanship?
- Does your child craft, draw, or build something in intricate detail?
- Does your child ask profound questions or know interesting facts that leave you wondering where he learned them?
- Does your child show compassion for the cares of the world and want to make a difference, or does your child act as an emotional gauge in the home?
- Did your child have an interest in ancient history, mythology (such as dragons or unicorns), other cultures, the sciences (including dinosaurs), or nature and animals at a young age?

Introduction. Strengths-Based Learning

- Does your child remember directions to places she's only been to once, or have a keen visual memory for stories or movies he heard or saw only once?



Right-brained children can build with detailed precision and creativity.

If you recognize your child possesses many of these attributes, you may have a right-brained learner. These are intelligent, creative, and inquisitive children who often seem to flounder in school. The reality is *creative children love to learn, but hate to be taught*. They resist or perform poorly because we are not teaching in the way they learn. We use left-brained teaching methods on a right-brained child. The good news and hope within this book is that there exists a valid and strengths-based educational approach best suited for right-brained learners and, with it, they flourish and thrive.

Consciously or subconsciously, our society believes that the scope and sequence created for our schools that favors left-brained thinkers is “the norm.” It’s held up as the measure of intelligence. For example, a current benchmark declares that reading can and should be accomplished through phonics by the age of 6 to 7 years. Around this, parents hold their breath, waiting to discover where their children will be classified. If a child reads before the benchmark, she’s “smart as a whip” or “gifted.” If he reads at the expected time, he’s “average.” Look out if she reads after that time frame! At best, she’s either “lazy,” “not living up to potential,” or “stupid.” At worst, the child is disordered. Broken. Learning disabled. The truth is that it’s *normal* for right-brained children to learn to read at a later age. Left-

The Right Side of Normal

brained benchmarks shouldn't be the only "normal" that children are held to in a scope and sequence.

The solution is to allow right-brained children to learn on a different time frame that honors their gifts and strengths. This doesn't mean we should follow the current left-brained scope and sequence, and then just wait a little longer. It means right-brained learners' success requires a totally different scope *and* sequence.

- ✓ The right-brained child needs different resources for learning than those currently found in school.
- ✓ The right-brained child needs a different skill development focus than found in school.
- ✓ The right-brained child needs a different time frame for learning than the one expected in school.

If *all* of these differences are honored, right-brained children will learn various subjects as joyfully and painlessly as their left-brained counterparts.



Right-brained children learn subjects at different times with different resources.

What's our current solution? We attempt to "fix" right-brained learners. We remediate when they don't meet left-brained

expectations (i.e., dyslexia programs). We medicate their behaviors (i.e., Ritalin). We even "jump-start" natural biological occurrences through exercises (i.e., vision tracking). There are consequences to these common "solutions." Some children decide they are "stupid" and take that notion into adulthood. Some children develop anxiety, depression, or grow angry as they are made to feel worthless. Some children decide they "just don't care" and "do the minimal," as if oppositional, because they want to feel some control over the

fact that they can't live up to the left-brained expectation. Some children self-medicate through alcohol or drugs in their teen years to ease the pain of not feeling "good enough." And some children get a learning disability label and live *down* to that expectation believing they are deficient in some way.

Right-brained learners are the most labeled children in our schools. There are so many labels they often overlapⁱⁱⁱ as professionals scramble to justify the discrepancy between the obvious intelligence and creativity displayed by these children and their inability to perform to the expectations of the school setting. Why is it that behind practically every learning disability label (ADD/ADHD, dyslexia, learning disabled, dysgraphia, twice exceptional, dyscalculia, etc.) is a right-brained learner? Where are the left-brained learning disabled children? They're difficult to find because left-brained children are flourishing in the left-brained learning environment! The good news is that when right-brained children are placed in a right-brained learning environment, they will also flourish and learning disability labels will all but disappear.

Maria Montessori said, "Free the child's potential, and you will transform him into the world." One important way to do this is by **understanding and honoring the natural learning path for right-brained children** that inherently develops their strengths and gifts. This book exhorts *shifting perspective* about learning disabilities by showcasing the *natural learning path* of the right-brained learner. This book further shares how we as parents, educators, and mentors can help facilitate *strengths-based learning* that celebrates **the right side of normal** allowing the right-brained learner to thrive.

References and Notes

ⁱ A scope and sequence is a term used in school to delineate a list of skills to be taught (scope), and the order in which the skills are taught (sequence).

ⁱⁱ See Chapter One for an explanation of the left-brained and right-brained labels.

ⁱⁱⁱ Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D., was the first who helped me recognize the overlapping of criteria in learning disabilities in her book: Silverman, Linda Kreger. *Upside-Down Brilliance: The Visual-Spatial Learner*. Denver: DeLeon Publishing, Inc., 2002. See Chapter Three in this book for more details.