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Aptitude, Achievement, Processing Deficit – What Does It All Mean?

By Sandy Gauvin

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You are sitting with the professionals who know about learning disabilities. They have been explaining what they will be looking for when they test your child.

"We look for an aptitude-achievement discrepancy as well as a processing deficit," one of them explains.

Your eyes glaze over and you begin to feel you're not too smart. It's like they're speaking another language. You haven't a clue what these people are talking about.

Actually, I've always felt that special education does use a foreign language.

That doesn't, however, mean that you can't learn it. Like any language, after a while, you'll get it.

When you meet with the Pupil Evaluation Team, or the Case Conference Committee, or the Child Study Team, or whatever it's called in your area, you will probably hear the sentence mentioned above.

Let's chop that sentence into pieces:

"We look for an aptitude-achievement discrepancy..."

Your child's aptitude is his ability to learn. When I was in school, we called it an IQ. In order for someone to have a learning disability, he has to have at least average aptitude for learning. In other words, he needs to have the ability to learn as well as any average child of his age.

His achievement refers to how well he is learning, or the extent to which he has received information and mastered certain skills. This may be where problems show up.

The evaluator looks at whether there is a big difference, or discrepancy, between those two scores – aptitude and achievement. Is there a big difference between what he SHOULD HAVE learned and

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what he really has learned?

Let's say your child has an aptitude of 100, which is exactly average. That means that he should be able to learn things as well as any average student of his age or grade. But let's say that the test found him to be achieving only at a level of 60 in reading. That's 40 points below what he SHOULD BE doing in reading. That's important information.

"...as well as a processing deficit."

The next thing the evaluator looks at is a "processing deficit". The term "processing" refers to the way your child's brain works. Can his brain handle information better through what he sees (visual channel) or through what he hears (auditory channel). Can he remember a list of 4 or 5 things, or does he forget

them quickly? How well does he find information he has stored in his head? How quickly can he process information?

A deficit in processing means that he has trouble with one of the ways his brain handles information.

Now, let's put it all together:

"There has to be an aptitude–achievement discrepancy..." The evaluator has found a big gap between your child's ability (100) and his achievement (60) in reading. That tells you that he hasn't learned what he needs to learn in order to be successful in reading.

"...as well as a processing deficit." The evaluator has found that he has a real problem remembering letters and sounds. And what is more necessary in order to learn to read than remembering letters and their sounds?

Now you know that he should be able to read like the other children in his class, but his brain isn't remembering letters and their sounds the way it should. That's what's standing in the way of his being able to read as well as the other children.

Chances are the team will decide that your child has a learning disability in reading and that he is eligible for special education services. He will be able to get extra help from a special teacher. There will be things you can do with him at home to help him as well. He will be able to receive help from people who know what will work best for him and who care enough to give him the skills he needs to be successful in life.

For more plain talk about learning disabilities, please visit us at www.ldperspectives.com.

Sandy Gauvin is a retired educator who has seen learning disabilities from many perspectives – as the parent of a daughter with learning disabilities, as the teacher of children with learning disabilities, and as an advocate for others who have diagnosed and unrecognized learning disabilities. Sandy shares her wisdom and her resources at www.LDPerspectives.com.

Alias: 'Aptitude'

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Be aware. You may become totally overwhelmed when you get the results of the special education testing on your child. There is a lot of "stuff" on that report! And much of it sounds like a foreign language to many people.

You get one piece the results from the Intelligence part of the test. This is extremely important information, but know that it will most likely come in disguise.

One of its disguises, or aliases, might be "Broad Cognitive Ability". Another may be "Aptitude." But, basically, they are measures of the same thing – your child's ability to process and learn information. So, for the sake of keeping things simple, let's just call it "aptitude."

As I've stated many times, in order for a child to be considered learning disabled, he has to show an average "aptitude" for learning. He must have the same ability to learn as well as any other child of his age or grade. An average aptitude score would be about 100, with anything between 85 and 115 being in the average range.

There are many different tests that measure a child's aptitude. One of these tests is the WISC–III. The Performance, or Perceptual Organization, section is the part that measures aptitude. It is divided into subtests, or smaller tests, and they assess different things that make up a person's aptitude.

Another common test used to measure aptitude is the Woodcock–Johnson Psychoeducational Battery – Revised. The aptitude section of this test is called the Tests of Cognitive Ability, and the overall aptitude score is called "Broad Cognitive Ability". It also has smaller tests called subtests, to measure aptitude, but they measure aptitude in a little different way than the WISC does.

There are other tests to determine your child's aptitude that don't involve reading or writing. Sometimes these tests are given if there is a language problem that might interfere with getting a true picture of the child's ability.

The important things to remember are that 1) you will probably see a score from one of these tests on your child's report, and 2) that score should be within the range of 85 to 115, for the most part.

The information you get from these scores will also tell you what the child is having difficulty with. For example, perhaps he has difficulty remembering what he sees. Perhaps he can't remember more than 1 or 2 directions at a time. Perhaps he can't process new information as fast as other children. These are important clues to letting you and the teachers know what to work on with your child and how to best help him.

When you get this information, the next thing that will happen is that this "aptitude" score will be compared with the child's "achievement" score.

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His achievement score is a measure of what he knows and what he has learned. These will be his scores in things like reading, written language, and math. In order for your child to show a learning disability, there has to be a large gap between his "aptitude" score (his ability to process information and learn) and what he has actually learned.

In other words, the report is showing that, although the child is able to learn as well as anyone else of his age or grade, something is causing this to not happen the way it should.

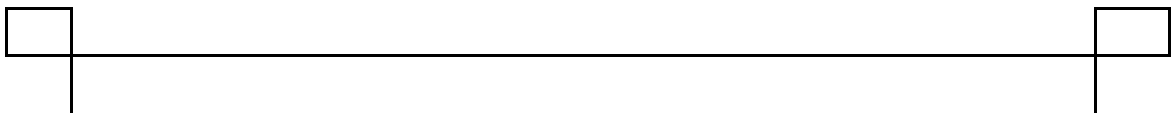
Why is that happening? When the pieces of the evaluation are put together, it should provide information about why your child is not learning the way the other children are. It will provide clues to you and his teachers about how to help him in the best way possible and how to help him help himself.

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